

PENGUIN
BOOKS

MYSTERY AND CRIME

**THE MAN FROM
EVERYWHERE**

NEWHAVEN-DIEPPE

SIMENON

MYSTERY AND CRIME

COMPLETE



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The Man from Everywhere
Georges Simenon
1ST OF THE 'PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS'
LE RELAIS D'ALSACE
1931
TRANSLATED BY STUART GILBERT

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GEORGES SIMENON 1903-1989
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first American edition

1. AT THE *RELAIS D'ALSACE*

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GRETEL and Lena, the two young waitresses, had almost finished laying the six tables nearest the counter. On the little table-cloths patterned with small red checks they were setting out the long-stemmed colored glasses used for Alsatian wine. Both had doll-like faces, flaxen ringlets, and it was easy to guess that they were sisters. Gretel, the younger, was sixteen; Lena two years older.

Her elbows resting on the cash-desk, Madame Keller, the proprietress of the *Relais d'Alsace*, was talking in undertones to her husband, who stood beside her, slightly swaying on his crutch. Between themselves they always used Alsatian *patois*.

“Then it’s settled?” said Madame Keller, twiddling the pencil which never left her hand. “I’ll have a talk with him.”

At her back was the kitchen hatch. The cook popped his head through it.

“Some matches, please.”

She began fumbling in a drawer full of loose change. Leaning on his crutch, her husband patted his pockets, produced a box.

Unthinkingly, Madame Keller opened it. Above the matches was a lock of brown hair tied with a pink ribbon.

Nick Keller grinned sheepishly. His wife sighed, shrugged her shoulders, tossed the lock of hair into a slop-pail beneath the counter, and handed the matches to the cook.

“All right,” she cut in as Nick started to speak. Meaning that, as usual, she’d decide what steps to take without his help; that he needn’t trouble to give explanations, and was welcome to amuse himself with all the little girls he could lay hands on.

A sound of footsteps on the stairs.

“Gretel! Lena! Run outside and tidy up the terrace.”

The girls made off at once, realizing they were *de trop*. His crutch clacking on the yellow tiles, Nick Keller hobbled away to the far end of the restaurant—it was nearly fifty feet long—sat down beside the gramophone, and began to wind it.

His wife did not need to click her fingers by way of signal. He started a record at the precise moment when a man emerged from the stairway and, yawning, gazed at the sky across the big bow-windows.

“Think we’ll have a storm, Madame Keller?” he asked.

His tone was familiar; his manner that of a visitor who feels at home in his hotel. It was four o’clock. He had just risen from an afternoon nap and still looked half asleep.

“Might I have a glass of mirabelle? Hasn’t the char-à-banc gone by yet?”

Madame Keller served him with her usual affability; yet there was a perceptible constraint in her gestures. Nick Keller, who was in a belted white coat of the type worn by chefs, stared moodily at the gramophone. Plying his crutch as if it were a walking-stick, he began tracing with it cryptic patterns on the floor.

“Here you are, Monsieur Serge.”

A man of about fifty; tall, with thinning gray hair. A suggestion, no more, of flabbiness in his features.

After a sip of his liqueur he took a few steps towards the middle of the room. For a moment he contemplated the stuffed grouse adorning the end wall; then the eagle perched on an artificial branch over the door; then a photograph of Nick Keller, taken before he went lame, which showed him, gun in hand, bestriding a dead boar.

Impossible to doubt he felt an attachment for all these things ; his eyes lingered on them almost sentimentally. Finally he took his stand before a water-color: vivid blue sea, a rockbound coast upon which rose a pillared temple.

“Do you know, madame, that’s a view of the Island of Rhodes?”

“Really?” She didn’t raise her eyes from the account-book in which she was making entries.

“Only, in actual fact, the place is far from being the earthly paradise it looks. In that calm, divinely blue sea men fish for sponges. And after four or five years of it every one of them develops spine-disease.”

She wasn't listening. She was silently rehearsing the remarks she had to make. There was a vague tension in the air.

On the terrace Gretel and Lena, while pretending to be busy with the tables, were peering through the windows into the restaurant. On the far side of the road could be seen the white frontage of the *Grand Hotel*, its terrace studded with gaudy sunshades, striped mauve and yellow.

There was a faint throbbing in the distance; a car taking the hill in top gear. Monsieur Serge spoke again.

"That must be a good car. They haven't even had to go down into second..." He went to the door, looked out. "Yes, a Packard. Hullo! They're Dutch."

The temptation was too strong; Nick Keller joined him in the doorway. The car was driven by a chauffeur in a white dustcoat with a blue collar. It drew up in front of the *Grand Hotel*.

"How do you know they're Dutch?" Nick asked.

"The number-plate. ND2165. ND stands for Netherlands."

The village of La Schlucht comprises only four buildings, a signpost, and a frontier boundary-mark which before the World War divided France from Germany and nowadays marks the boundary of Alsace.

The signpost announces that the altitude is 1236 meters; that Gérardmer, to the left, is thirteen kilometers distant, and Munster, to the right, twenty-eight.

The first building as you enter the village is a fancy-goods shop, selling picture-postcards and souvenirs. Opposite it stands the *Grand Hotel*, with a petrol-pump and garage, gay sunshades, and a porter sporting a gold-braided cap, known locally as the "runner."

Next to the fancy-shop is a restaurant, above which some bedrooms are available. This, the *Relais d'Alsace*, is owned by the worthy Monsieur and Madame Keller.

A hundred yards farther on is the *Hôtel des Cols*, less palatial than the *Grand*, but more comfortable than the *Relais d'Alsace*.

The Packard had halted in the middle of the road. A handsome car, as sleek and glossy as when it had left the showroom. The chauffeur opened the door.

But his employers did not alight. They were two, a man and a woman, and they were carrying on a heated argument in Dutch.

“They don’t seem able to make up their minds,” Nick Keller remarked.

“The man wants to go higher, to the Honeck. His wife says they’ve come quite high enough already, and she’s beginning to have trouble with her breathing.”

“So you understand Dutch too?”

Monsieur Serge was listening with amusement, studying the faces of the travelers, who went on wrangling, while the well-schooled chauffeur stood patiently by, holding the door open. Greatly impressed by the magnificence of the car, the porter of the *Grand* was hovering at a deferential distance, cap in hand. In the window of the manager’s office on the ground floor a curtain stirred.

“The lady wins!” smiled Monsieur Serge.

Nick Keller shuffled a step forward. The woman had put one foot on the running-board, preparing to alight. A shapely knee, a well-filled silk stocking, had come into view.

She was dark, inclined to plumpness, alluring in a rather obvious way.

Her companion, on the contrary, was a very fair young man. His complexion was as creamy as Gretel’s. He had big china-blue eyes, indeterminate features, and was wearing a loosely fitting gray suit that blurred the outlines of his figure to the point of evanescence.

For form’s sake he was still protesting. But he knew he was beaten. When the young woman stepped down and cast a pleased, possessive glance around her, he picked up a small attaché-case fitted with a safety-lock and joined her on the road. After giving some orders in Dutch to the chauffeur, he turned towards the hotel.

Nick Keller’s eyes were sparkling, as always when a pretty woman was on view. Leaning on his crutch, he lingered in the doorway, watching the woman, who had started down the road to see the view across the valley.

Helped by the hotel porter, the chauffeur unloaded from the back of the car a number of expensive-looking suitcases, stamped with a monogram above which was a coronet.

“Monsieur Serge!”

Madame Keller, who was still at the cash-desk, pencil in hand, had emitted a brisk cough before calling his name.

He went to her at once, all amiability, and drained his glass. There was a conflict of emotions on the woman's face. Ordinarily she wore a sugary smile, displayed a servile eagerness to please her customers.

Now, however, she had something disagreeable to say. And—she couldn't help it—her features grew hard, so hard that it seemed as if for once she were revealing her true character.

"I'd like a word with you—about your bill."

Monsieur Serge didn't flinch. But, when he looked up, his brows were knitted and his eyes mournful.

"For two months," she went on, "I've not said anything, as you assured me the money was coming ; it was an oversight on the part of your bank, and so on."

Her tone was downright rude, though perhaps this was unintentional. She was so unused to speaking severely to a customer that now she overdid it. And the strain had made her face quite pale.

"Last month you told me it was a question of only a day or two. We're not rich people. Times are hard, and we've big bills to meet."

He smiled to himself bitterly. Not rich people, the Kellers, who'd just bought the finest site in La Schlucht and were going to run up another hotel, even larger than the *Grand*!

"You can't deny we've always treated you more as a friend than an ordinary visitor."

Monsieur Serge swallowed hard, stared at the big room which had gradually come to seem to him like home; at the stuffed grouse, the picture of Rhodes, the geraniums deployed, in typical Alsatian style, in a ring round the bow-windows.

"And we've never pestered you with questions, that you know."

The words sounded harmless, but were barbed with malice. Malice aforethought without a doubt. For, when uttering them, Madame Keller had dropped her eyes, and though her tone was casual, it rang false.

Five months had passed since Monsieur Serge had come to stay at the *Relais d'Alsace*, and during those five months he had done nothing but go for mountain walks, eat, sleep, and read the newspapers. He had made

himself at home; so much so that sometimes when the bar ran short of beer he took it on himself to go down to the cellar and fetch a bottle. Once or twice he had even served a customer himself when for some reason none of the staff was at hand.

Gretel and Lena treated him like an elder brother, and shared their childish secrets with him. And if any of the Sunday trippers started being too familiar with the girls, he would intervene, politely but firmly.

“Really now! Can’t you see they’re hardly more than children?”

He had come to be regarded almost as a member of the household. The engineer employed at the local sawmill would come to him for advice. The brewer from Munster always shook hands with him. The postman, like everybody else in the village, hailed him as “Monsieur Serge.”

“Two thousand seven hundred and eighty francs. That’s what you owe us now... It’s got to stop!”

Obviously all this had been rehearsed; behind it lay long confabulations with her husband.

“You tackle him.”

“No, it had better be you. That’ll impress him more.”

“Suppose he tries to put us off again... ?”

Monsieur Serge was always very dignified. That was, perhaps, why it was so hard to worry him about money matters. He habitually wore a rather distant look, and had a far more aristocratic bearing than the plutocrat in the Packard who had just entered the *Grand*.

Impressed by his manners, the local busybodies wondered what such a man could be after in a dead-and-alive place like La Schlucht. “It isn’t as if he was consumptive and came here for the altitude. He isn’t even on a diet. One never sees him doing anything.”

Malice preense behind her rather artificial smile, Madame Keller had been alluding to such gossip when she murmured: “We’ve never pestered you with questions.”

Nick Keller had deemed it better to keep out of range till the “strafe” was over. He could be heard on the terrace, nagging at Lena and Gretel.

“It doesn’t seem natural,” Madame Keller went on. “Why should your bank take so long sending the money you wrote for?”

Still, Madame Keller didn't seem a bad sort. One's first impression was of a placid, easy-going woman, and one had to know her well to realize that she never spared herself—or others—, ran the hotel single-handed and, what was more, managed to keep Nick, her husband, out of serious mischief—no easy task.

She was still young, and had retained the genteel manners inculcated at the boarding-school where she had been educated.

“And I think it preferable, in your interests as well as ours, not to let the account run on. Please don't take offense. Only—we're not rich people...”

Still harping on her “poverty”! Monsieur Serge rubbed his eyes. Didn't he sometimes help her, on Sundays, to tot up the takings—at this very cash-desk where she now was queening it?

“Listen,” he said. “I can't explain why the money hasn't come. But I've a platinum bracelet here which is worth, on the lowest estimate, twenty thousand francs.”

He held up his left wrist, a shapely wrist, shadowed by a fine silken growth of down. Round it was a strip of solid metal shaped roughly into a circle. More like an ingot than a bracelet.

But Madame Keller was not in a mood for compromise; her expression made this clear. Her lips had grown still tighter, her cheeks still more pinched.

“We're hotel-keepers, and I'm afraid that sort of transaction...”

He smiled, less with his lips than inwardly.

“Even if I made it over to you in settlement of my bill for the last two months and for the coming month? On the understanding, of course, that I could buy it back when my money turns up.”

A gleam of cupidity crossed the woman's eyes. But mistrust prevailed.

“You must realize that people like us, who don't know anything about such articles... But why not sell it to a jeweler at Colmar or Munster?”

The Packard was being steered into the garage across the road. The shutters of the best rooms on the first floor stood open. One had glimpses of a maid's white cap, and the woman who had just arrived.

A crutch tapped on the tiled floor; Nick Keller hobbled into the restaurant, announcing:

“We'll have a storm tonight.”

At the same moment Monsieur Serge was saying:

“All right. I’ll take the bus to Munster. You shall be paid tomorrow morning.”

Madame Keller was moved to launch a Parthian shot.

“Do you really intend to stay here much longer? I can’t think what you see in this place. Such a dull hole! Especially for a man like you, who’s knocked about the world.”

Another innuendo! One of the many mysterious things about this man was that he seemed to speak nearly all foreign languages. One day some Egyptians had fetched up at the *Grand Hotel*. The porter had come across and mentioned that nobody could understand them. Monsieur Serge had acted as interpreter. He had spent the evening drinking champagne with the Egyptians, whose language he spoke fluently, and for the next ten days was always in their company.

He spoke German too, and English. Even Alsatian *patois*—to the amusement of Lena and Gretel.

When the wireless was turned on in the evening and messages in Morse came through between the items, he decoded them.

“A Danzig steamship company is telling a steamer in the Pas-de-Calais to unload her cargo at Boulogne instead of Havre.”

Madame Keller went on talking.

“And, of course, there isn’t a soul here in the autumn. The second season doesn’t begin till January, with the winter sports.”

Good-humoredly he protested:

“My dear, good Madame Keller—really now... ! Well, I’m off to Munster. You shall have your money tomorrow.”

He had only just time to run upstairs and fetch his cape and hat. The Munster bus could be heard coming round the bend.

A beauty spot. Three hotels along a hundred yards of road. The *Grand Hotel* monopolizing the smart folk and well-to-do. The *Hôtel des Cols* catering for the smaller fry on holiday, and used in winter by skiing parties from neighboring towns.

Unlike these, the *Relais d’Alsace* was patronized neither by foreigners nor holiday-makers. It was primarily a café, where lorry-drivers on the run from Gérardmer to Munster pulled up for a glass of the rough local wine or

mild Alsatian beer. Here, too, on Sundays, rucksacked hikers would demand a table and drinks, unpack their food and eat it, singing in chorus.

No electric light, as in the other hotels, or running water. But, by way of compensation, a restaurant as cheerful as it was capacious, red deal tables, light-oak wainscoting, and large bow-windows with an exceptionally fine view.

Six tables always laid—check table-cloths, brightly colored wine-glasses—ready for prospective diners.

Last, but not least: an innocently charming welcome from Gretel and Lena, the Alsatian sisters, all smiles and dimples, their ringlets flashing as they fluttered to and fro between the tables and the kitchen hatch.

Next day at lunch-time Monsieur Serge's table was unoccupied.

"He'll come back by the two o'clock bus," Nick Keller had prognosticated. "Wonder if he'll have had his lunch? Maybe not."

He and his wife were having their meal at the table nearest the counter, for Madame Keller had to keep on getting up, to draw a glass of beer, cut a slice of bread, or set out a plateful of cold sausage and potato salad.

Near the window was Monsieur Hertzfeld, the engineer who had come to La Schlucht to supervise the installation of new plant at the local saw-mill. He had been here for three months and would be staying some time longer.

A cheerful little man who took in the Strasburg papers and engineering periodicals. Now and again, on a Saturday, he would announce that he was expecting a young lady, a cousin of his, for the week-end.

Everybody knew what that meant, and smiled discreetly. For appearance's sake he booked a second bedroom on such occasions. He had once remarked, speaking of Monsieur Serge:

"I shouldn't be surprised if he's a professional engineer, though, as far as I can make out, he never passed through any of the big training-schools. Still, it would take a cleverer man than myself to say what exactly his profession is, or even his nationality."

Two tourists, a man and a woman, were eating at a table without a table-cloth. Which signified that they'd brought their own food, and had merely ordered drinks.

Gretel was in the kitchen. Lena was waiting on a newcomer, a man in his thirties, who had come on a motorcycle at about eleven and had spent an

hour at the *Grand-Hotel* before coming across to the *Relais*.

There was something abnormal in the silence of the room. Keller and his wife, like the new-comer sitting by himself, had an expectant air.

Lena was told off sharply several times for trivial misdeeds, such as placing a fork too noisily on a table.

Madame Keller shot frequent glances at the wall-clock, which played a little tune each time it struck the hour.

“Here he is!”

From the direction of Munster came the sound of a char-à-banc changing into bottom speed, and the familiar toot of its horn. They listened to it laboring up the gradient. They counted the bends. “It’s passing below the Pierre Fendue now.”

The rattle grew more pronounced. With a screech of brakes a big blue car halted in front of the window.

Three passengers for the *Grand*. Some people going on to Gérardmer dropped in at the *Relais* for a glass of beer. A sack of potatoes ordered by Madame Keller was dumped in the yard.

Monsieur Hertzfeld was drumming on the table with his knife-handle. His nerves seemed on edge. There was a shifty look in Nick Keller’s eyes. His wife had turned quite pale; her lips were bloodless.

She exchanged a quick glance with the new-comer, meaning, “It’s he.”

Monsieur Serge alighted from the car. He was wearing a rough mountaineering cape and a green felt hat. As he opened the door he sniffed the air and exclaimed cheerfully:

“Cabbage soup ! Of course, it’s Thursday. I’d forgotten.”

He appeared a little surprised. Lena hadn’t come up as usual to take his coat. Madame Keller was looking away, Nick eating noisily, bending over his plate, while the engineer seemed engrossed in a technical review.

Only one person, the unknown man, was gazing at him.

“My lunch, please, Lena. I’ve had nothing to eat since I got up.”

The eagle still clawed its branch above the door, the stuffed grouse was in its usual place. Yet something had changed—was it an atmosphere of veiled hostility he sensed in the room?

There had been a storm in the night and the weather had turned cold. A fire had been lit in the big earthenware stove. Monsieur Serge went up to it. As he was warming his hands his eyes fell on the unknown man. He frowned, his shoulders lifted slightly. Then he smiled to himself, as though an idea had struck him: "They don't believe I've brought the money!"

He went up to Madame Keller and said, raising his voice to show his unconcern:

"I've something for you. This, to begin with."

He fished up from his pocket a gold brooch in the form of an eagle, with a tiny ruby for its eye. It might have cost two hundred francs or so.

The woman looked worried, wouldn't meet his gaze.

"And this too," he went on.

From his wallet he took some thousand-franc notes.

"One, two, three, four, five. I'll pay two months in advance."

The new-comer had stopped eating. His eyes were fixed on Monsieur Serge.

Nick Keller was lacing and unlacing his boot, heaving deep sighs.

The engineer was emitting little nervous grunts.

Without touching the brooch or notes, Madame Keller said:

"I think that gentleman wishes to talk to you."

Lena kept her back to him, pretending to be busy arranging macaroons on a plate.

Monsieur Serge looked at the new-comer.

"Talk to me?" he repeated in a surprised tone.

The other man rose to his feet with an embarrassed air.

"Excuse me. I'd like to put some questions to you. I'm Inspector Mercier of the Strasburg police... But don't let me keep you from your lunch."

There was not the faintest sound in the room. Yet everyone was eating.

"Ah !" remarked Monsieur Serge quite coolly.

He turned to Lena.

"Lay my place at Monsieur Mercier's table, my dear."

On the wall facing him was a splash of limpid color, the picture of the "earthly paradise" of Rhodes.

2. THE HOLE IN THE WALL

« ^ »

WELL, what have you to say, Monsieur Mercier?”

No irony in the tone, no trace of bluff. On the contrary, Monsieur Serge appeared so calm that the Kellers began to feel uncomfortable.

The Inspector replied, his mouth full:

“I only want some information. You spent the night at Munster, didn’t you? Usually you stay at the *Lion d’Argent*...”

“And I wasn’t there last night. Quite correct.”

“Then, what hotel did you stay at?”

“At none. I spent the night walking about.”

A sudden tension in the air. Lena, who was waiting on the two men, pulled a long face, looked away.

“To which jeweler did you sell your platinum bracelet?”

Monsieur Serge gazed at Madame Keller, then at his bare wrist, and hesitated for a moment.

“I decline to answer that question.”

Inspector Mercier went on eating. He had a good-natured face; frank, forthright eyes. But now and again he shot a furtive glance at the man opposite him. After each glance he seemed to ponder.

“Will you allow me, in my turn, to ask a question? I’ve put up with yours, you must admit, with a good grace. The least thing you can do is to let me know—what on earth it’s all about!”

He had his high-society manner, as the Kellers called it.

Each time he was about to speak he passed his napkin gently over his lips.

“Do you know Monsieur and Madame Van der Laer?” the police officer inquired.

Monsieur Serge began to shake his head; then paused and glanced towards the *Grand Hotel*.

“Excuse me, are they the Dutch couple who came here yesterday in a Packard? I had a glimpse of them as they were getting out of their car.”

“Well, last night, or, rather, early this morning, a theft took place in their rooms.”

“Ah!” Monsieur Serge gave an understanding nod; then slowly added: “They rang up Strasburg. You came here on a motor-cycle. You made inquiries about potential suspects—that’s to say, all the people at La Schlucht just now.”

Madame Keller had a sudden desire to see to something in the kitchen; she didn’t come back. Her husband went on eating doggedly, his elbows on the table.

“No doubt you followed the method of elimination, starting with the servants. Finally there remained only one person open to suspicion. An eccentric individual who’s been staying here some months, doing absolutely nothing; who speaks several languages and as to whose means of subsistence nothing is known... A little more wine?... And, as it so happens, yesterday he couldn’t pay his hotel bill, and spoke of selling a platinum bracelet.”

“Excuse me,” said the Inspector in an equally polite tone. “There’s more than that. A farm-hand called Renard—you probably know him better than I do, as you’ve been here so long—says that he saw you this morning at about five, on the road not far from here.”

“Have you rung up Munster?”

“Yes. Not only the *Lion d’Argent*, where you didn’t sleep last night, but all the jewelers and second-hand dealers in the town... You see, I’m putting all my cards on the table.”

They were speaking in low tones. From where he sat, the engineer could only catch a stray word now and then. When Lena was not handing round a dish she fell to gazing at Monsieur Serge. “So that’s what a burglar looks like!” she seemed to be thinking.

The police officer’s flow of talk seemed to be drying up. He was frowning heavily, like a man who’s making a great effort to remember something.

“Got an alibi?” he asked at last.

“Well, no. But I assume it isn’t necessary. Have you inspected the scene of the crime?”

“It was the first thing I did.”

Monsieur Serge rolled his napkin, slipped it into a wooden ring, rose to his feet.

“I trust you’ll be good enough to let me have a look at the rooms occupied by the—the... What was the name?”

“Van der Laers.”

“Are they relations of the Managing Director of the East Indies Bank?”

“Karl Van der Laer is his son.”

“You don’t say so!” He sounded interested, but only mildly. “What’s he here for?”

“A rest cure. High mountains don’t agree with him. He likes walking, and the Vosges give him just what he wants at a moderate altitude. At four this morning he started out to climb the Honeck, which is six kilometers from here. When he got back at about eight, he found that a small attaché-case with a safety-lock had been rifled.”

“Obviously.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing... Or, rather, that the moment couldn’t have been better chosen.”

The Inspector looked at him with surprise. Nick Keller had finished his meal and was shuffling towards the terrace, trailing his crutch.

“So it comes to this,” the Inspector said. “You were out all night, and you’ve no witness to prove you were at Munster. On the contrary, there’s a witness to prove you were seen near here. Yesterday you had no money. Today you have a number of thousand-franc notes. And you can’t tell me to whom you sold your bracelet.”

“Perfectly correct! Shall we make a move?”

He lit a cigar, after testing its dryness against his ear. As he went out he waved to Hertzfeld, who seemed uncertain whether to return the greeting. Then he patted Lena’s cheek. She blushed.

“Where’s your sister, Lena?”

She tried to answer, lost her nerve, and all but burst into tears.

The two men were seen to cross the road and enter the *Grand*, in whose glass-roofed restaurant lunch was not yet over.

The manageress, a white-haired lady in a mauve silk dress, with consciously superior manners, came out of her office.

“So you’ve nabbed him, Inspector?” She disdained to look at Monsieur Serge.

“Too soon to say. Please give me the key.”

They went up to the first floor, on which the Van der Laers had a suite of three rooms leading into each other. The room on the left was Madame Van der Laer’s bedroom, that on the right her husband’s; the middle room, from which the bed had been removed, served as a private sitting-room.

Apprised of the Inspector’s arrival, the Dutchman joined them. He looked bored. His suit was of an even paler gray than on the day before, and he was wearing knickerbockers, which displayed his meager calves.

The Inspector opened a door. The room was in disorder and reeked of eau-de-Cologne. A luxuriously fitted dressing-case stood open, all its contents embossed with a monogram and coronet.

On the pale green silk pajamas also, which sprawled across the bed, a coronet had been embroidered.

The Inspector pointed to the dressing-table.

“There’s the attaché-case the lock of which was forced.”

It was the one which the Dutchman had himself carried from the car to the hotel. The lock had not been so much forced as wrenched off} it looked as if a pair of pincers had been used. There was a rent in the leather below it.

Van der Laer’s big, listless eyes lingered on the two men. To break the silence he remarked indifferently:

“It’s not so much the money...”

“By the way,” Monsieur Serge put in, “how much money was there exactly?”

“Sixty thousand francs. I changed my money yesterday, at Paris.”

“Where did you put the attaché-case?”

It was Monsieur Serge, imperturbable as ever, who seemed to be conducting the inquiry.

“On that table.”

The table stood against the wall, two yards from the door. Some thirty inches above it there was a hole in the wall, through which one could see

into the corridor. Monsieur Serge gazed inquiringly at the Inspector, who explained:

“The hotel’s comparatively new, and central heating’s only just being installed. The masons have got the holes ready for the pipes, but they haven’t arrived yet. That’s why the wall is in this condition. Last evening a sheet of thick paper was pasted over the hole. This morning at four it was still intact. At eight, when Monsieur Van der Laer came back, it had a hole in it.”

The Dutchman nodded assent. Then turned towards the corridor, where footsteps could be heard approaching. It was his wife. She halted on the threshold, said to him in Dutch:

“Still at it? What a bother it is!”

“It’s pretty obvious,” Inspector Mercier continued, “how the thief went about it, don’t you agree? It was child’s-play for him getting inside the hotel; they’re a trusting lot here. Then, when Monsieur Van der Laer was away, he’d only to slip his arm through the opening and draw the case towards him. Then he forced it with his pincers and extracted the contents.”

Monsieur Serge smiled. He turned to the Dutchman.

“Might I ask you to replace the attaché-case exactly where it was before the theft? Excuse me, but there’s something I’d like to ask you. When you left this morning, did you lock the door of this room?”

“Yes.”

“Where was Madame Van der Laer?”

“My wife was in bed, asleep.”

“And was she still sleeping when you got back?”

“Yes.”

The young woman was staring hard at Monsieur Serge.

“May I assume that none of the servants could have got into your suite while you were away?”

The Inspector answered. He was still watching Monsieur Serge with grave attention.

“Certainly. No one entered. The locks have not been tampered with.”

Placidly Monsieur Serge took off his coat, and felt the bulge of his arm below the elbow.

Then, “No,” he murmured, as if talking to himself. “That wouldn’t prove it conclusively. If this lady would kindly...”

Van der Laer started to say something. The Inspector asked:

“What do you want her to do?”

“Sorry to trouble Madame Van der Laer. But I wonder if she’d mind going out into the corridor and putting her arm through the hole, to see if she can reach the attaché-case?”

The Dutchman looked daggers at Monsieur Serge. His wife, however, rather peevishly, complied.

“All right. I’ll do what he wants.”

The hole was about four inches in diameter. But its course was crooked, and the wall thick.

The young woman’s hand came through, then the rest of her arm.

“Try to get hold of the attaché-case. More to the left. Still more.” He turned to the police officer. “It’s a good six inches out of her reach. Of course, the thief may have used a stick or something, to draw it towards him.”

He pushed the attaché-case towards her hand. The tips of her fingers brushed the leather.

“Please note,” said Monsieur Serge composedly, “that the lady can’t see what she’s doing, that she can only move her arm horizontally, and that, placed as she is, there’s no way of using her hand to any purpose. I defy her to open that case with a pair of pincers or any other sort of tool... Thank you, madame. You must forgive me for having bothered you to help us in this little experiment.”

Then he too went out into the corridor. Rolling up his sleeve, he exposed to view a graceful but sinewy arm, and inserted it in the aperture.

His forearm just went through, though not without being grazed by the rough edges of the brickwork. But, once his biceps was wedged in the hole, he was unable to move his arm in any direction.

“I hope, Inspector, you’ve duly taken note... And you can’t have failed to notice that when I came here my skin wasn’t grazed in any way. Here’s my left arm. Unscratched too. It’s a physical impossibility, as I think you’ll agree, for the theft to have been committed in the way you suppose—even by a woman or an exceptionally thin man.”

Once again Van der Laer seemed on the point of intervening, but thought better of it.

“Your theory about the hole in the wall,” Monsieur Serge went on, “is the one that would naturally suggest itself. At first sight it seemed obvious. Only it broke down when put to the test.”

The Inspector was looking concerned.

“From which it seems to follow...”

“That the theft was committed by somebody *inside* the suite.”

“Really, gentlemen!” Van der Laer sounded outraged; his lips were quivering.

His wife said nothing. She was gazing at Monsieur Serge with a peculiar intensity, a somber glow in her big dark eyes.

The Inspector became flustered.

“Please! There’s no need to jump to conclusions. After all, this experiment...”

“But there was only my wife in here,” the Dutchman broke in. “And I... I...” He bit his lip, furious with himself for having been the first to point this out. Tactfully Mercier came to his rescue.

“And, as Madame Van der Laer is obviously above suspicion, the investigation will continue. I have every reason to hope...” He broke off. The situation was a delicate one. All eyes were focused on the damaged attaché-case, which still contained some business documents and letters. Rather lamely the Inspector added: “Well, I suppose I’d better be going. Good afternoon.”

He bowed to the young woman, who refrained from shaking hands with him, then to her husband, who remarked stiffly:

“As things stand, I’m more anxious than ever for the thief to be discovered. If necessary, I’ll call in a private inquiry agent.”

A faint smile hovered on Monsieur Serge’s lips. With a discreet bow, quite at his ease, he withdrew from the room.

“What about going down, Karl?” said Madame Van der Laer.

Without waiting for his reply, she followed the two men along the corridor, then down the stairs. The police officer was in front. Monsieur Serge stood aside to let her pass him. The passage was wide, but she

brushed close against him. So close that for a moment her face was only an inch or two from his.

Her eyes were hard; a glint of anger lurked in their depths.

“Neat work!” she breathed.

Monsieur Serge seemed not to have heard. He walked slowly down behind her. When they reached the foot of the stairs her nervousness had visibly increased. After a moment her husband joined her.

As they had already taken their leave, the Inspector and his companion walked straight out on to the road. The porter was lounging against a petrol-pump. A char-à-banc had just disgorged, for a ten minutes’ halt, some thirty tourists, who, after buying picture-postcards, were flocking down to the corner of the road to contemplate the famous view.

As they were crossing the road Monsieur Serge inquired:

“Have you anything more to ask me?”

“Yes, two or three points for my report. Have you your identity papers?”

“Certainly. And you’ll find them in perfect order.”

“Are you French?”

“My name’s Serge Morrow. My father was of English origin, my mother Russian. I was born at Paris. French nationality.”

The Inspector emitted a sort of grunt.

“Ever lived in Egypt?”

“No.”

“Excuse me!” Pretending to brush a speck of dust off Monsieur Serge’s collar, the police officer pulled out a couple of gray hairs.

Monsieur Serge swung round on him.

“Making a collection of them, are you?” he inquired with an amiable smile, in which, however, the irony was unmistakable.

“Would you kindly tell me what are your means of subsistence?”

“I’ve money of my own.”

“Where? In what bank, or business?”

But Monsieur Serge merely went on smiling.

They had halted in the middle of the road. Looking towards the windows of the *Relais d’Alsace*, they had glimpses of the Kellers craning their necks,

agog with curiosity. Lena, too, who was standing in a corner of the restaurant, duster in hand, was gazing at the road.

The Van der Laers came out of the *Grand*, talking excitedly in Dutch.

“They’re having a tiff,” said Monsieur Serge, who caught fragments of their talk. “She’s furious with him for making such a fuss over a miserable sixty thousand francs and spoiling their holiday. I think I heard her say, ‘You’re as mean as your father!’ ”

The Dutch couple were walking up and down amongst the herd of tourists from the char-à-banc. Their chauffeur was shining up the Packard under the admiring gaze of the white-clad kitchen staff of the *Grand*.

“See you again,” the Inspector said. “You’ll be staying on here, won’t you? I must get back to Strasburg now.” He started towards his motor-cycle, turned back. “By the way, I’d better take your identity papers with me.”

Monsieur Serge handed them over with a good grace. The Dutchman and his wife parted company near the hotel. The latter went indoors, while her husband started off in the direction of the BlackLake.

She had not been more than five minutes in the hotel before she came out again, obviously in a state of agitation. She walked straight past Monsieur Serge, giving him a long, deliberate stare. It might have been a challenge; but it looked more like an appeal, almost an invitation.

Then she took a path leading to the Honeck. The slowness of her pace and the way she swayed her hips were those of a woman expecting to be followed.

The char-à-banc tooted. The excursionists flocked up, scrambled into their seats. Four or five times a day this happened. A char-à-banc clattered up the empty road, which for the next ten minutes swarmed with a noisy mob of people. Then at a peremptory hoot the road was cleared as if by magic, and residents had the place to themselves once more.

Madame Van der Laer stopped to pick a flower, swung round, gazed meaningly at Monsieur Serge, walked on again.

Almost the tactics of the lowest kind of street-walker. She, however, was wearing a pale green tailor-made costume hailing from the Rue de la Paix, gossamer silk stockings, and her snake-skin shoes were the creation of an artist in footwear.

Lena came to the door of the *Relais*.

“Will you be dining here, Monsieur Serge?”

Her cheeks were pink. She was afraid of being scolded, and cast timid glances towards her employers, who had remained inside. “Has the Inspector gone?” she asked.

She wanted to say more but was too shy. As a matter of fact, she seemed to have come out mainly to discover what the Dutchwoman was up to.

“You haven’t drunk your mirabelle,” she added.

Madame Van der Laer was still casting glances over her shoulder. Monsieur Serge patted Lena’s cheek; her ringlets were fluttering in the wind.

“I’ll drink it presently. My cape, please.”

“Are you going away... ?”

He didn’t answer. She went in and fetched Monsieur Serge’s big tweed cape, which he slung over his arm. At a turn of the path Madame Van der Laer halted and began plucking leaves from a bush.

Lena watched Monsieur Serge’s receding form. As she turned back into the restaurant her cheeks were still flushed. She heard Madame Keller saying:

“He’s bound to be vexed with us. Shouldn’t be surprised if he moves to the *Hôtel des Cols*. If I’d known the Inspector wasn’t going to arrest him...”

Nick Keller started the gramophone. Then he set to his lips a flute, which he tried, without success, to play to the accompaniment of the records. Intent on the two young waitresses going about their work, his eyes lit up whenever one of them bent over a table and her blouse sagged at the neck.

Madame Keller was fingering the brooch which Monsieur Serge had given her, unable to make up her mind what to do with it. At last she tried it on in front of a glass; then unhooked it with a sigh.

“Do stop that noise!” she cried peevishly to her husband, who was playing out of tune.

Monsieur Serge had reached the first bend of the path; he was not more than ten yards behind Madame Van der Laer. She had ceased looking round and was walking composedly ahead.

3. ON THE HONECK

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THEY could not be seen from the road. The path wound its upward way across the pine-woods and ended at the Honeck, the highest viewpoint in that sector of the Vosges. At the Honeck was a hotel, an observation tower with field-glasses on hire, and an indicator showing the position of the various landmarks within range.

They did not need, however, to cover the three miles between them and the summit.

It began by the young woman dropping her vanity-bag when Monsieur Serge was only a few yards behind. Impossible to say if he noticed her mishap. For he continued on his way with the slow, swinging stride of the practiced mountaineer. He passed her just as she was picking up the bag.

This path was familiar ground to Monsieur Serge. With the regularity of a man taking a constitutional he had walked it twice a day during the last few months. He did not need to look at the red arrows on the trees pointing the way, and he skirted the boulders fallen on the path without needing to look down.

Madame Van der Laer could only see his back: the broad but shapely back of a man in his fifties who takes trouble to keep down his fat. And certain small details may have struck her. That, for instance, the great cape over his arm was of an unusual cut, the specialty of an eminent London firm dealing in mountaineering kit. True, it was old and the worse for wear—but it had kept its “class.” Likewise his shoes, made to measure by an expert bootmaker.

Even Monsieur Serge’s bearing was distinctive. Not in any way studied. But in his attitude and gestures there was a hint of reticence—of poise and self-control—which is only to be found in people of a certain breeding, of a certain social rank.

The clockwork regularity of his stride had something exasperating about it. Every five paces he gained a yard on the young woman; when he was leading by fifty he disappeared round a bend.

Her impatience got the better of her. She had had enough of this solitary walk through the interminable pine-woods. She quickened her step, muttering some words in a foreign tongue—that was not Dutch.

She was almost running as she came round the corner. The path went straight for a considerable distance; there was nobody in sight.

She stopped short, puzzled and, above all, vexed. Without troubling to control the expression on her face, she started looking round.

Suddenly she blushed. There, barely three yards away, was Monsieur Serge seated on a boulder in a patch of shadow. She spoke too soon, in her eagerness to cover her confusion.

“Excuse me,” she said—in Hungarian. “Could you tell me if this path goes to the Honeck?”

He rose politely, threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

“Yes, it leads there,” he replied in the same language.

The woman’s bosom was heaving. Her breath came quickly. She seemed to take it as a point up to her that he had answered in Hungarian.

“Is it much farther on?”

“About two miles. A pretty stiff climb.”

“Are you Hungarian?”

Courteously he replied:

“No, I haven’t that honor...”

She tried to think of something to say, so as to prolong the conversation.

“Still, you look awfully like a Hungarian, and you talk the language perfectly.”

He acknowledged the compliment with a slight inclination of his head, but made no effort to explain.

“Do you know, three years ago, in Budapest, at the *Continental Hotel*, I met a gentleman who was extraordinarily like you...”

But she drew blank again. Monsieur Serge merely looked a shade surprised; a polite smile flickered on his lips.

“You know Dutch too, don’t you?” she said in that language.

“A bit.”

She was losing ground. Try as she might, she couldn’t hide her discomfiture... She looked away. Then she blurted out with a sort of nervous eagerness:

“I suppose you... you don’t really *want* to make trouble, do you?”

If he was playing a part, he played it to perfection. From head to foot he presented the picture of a well-bred man completely baffled by a remark addressed to him by a stranger, but doing his best to understand, and to ease the situation.

“Trouble? May I ask what you’re referring to, exactly?”

She gave her vanity-bag an angry tug that all but snapped the handle.

“You want a lot, don’t you?”

She had switched back into Hungarian, with a few words of German thrown in. He replied in kind.

“Really, you make me quite embarrassed. What *can* you mean?”

She was trembling. Suddenly she looked him full in the face; menace and entreaty mingled in her eyes.

“How much do you want? I’ll only ask you to give me three or four days’ time.”

“I still don’t follow. You must have mistaken me for someone else, I imagine. Yes, that must be it. Let me introduce myself. My name’s Serge Morrow.”

She laughed. There was an overtone of hysteria in her laugh. Then, her lips twisting with rage, she cried impulsively:

“Well, I must congratulate you, Monsieur Serge Morrow—on a very neat piece of work. My husband and the Inspector have fallen for the theory you so cleverly put into their heads—that the theft must have been committed by somebody inside the suite. And, as I was the only person inside the suite... I own I’d love to know how on earth you managed it. There was no way of forcing the lock with one’s arm jammed in that hole in the wall.”

He sighed, gazed vaguely at the pine-trees beside the path.

“I’m more than sorry to hear that I’ve brought you under suspicion—I assure you I hadn’t the least intention of doing so. An absurd charge had been brought against me, and a mere glance at the scene of the crime enabled me to clear myself. I sincerely hope the police won’t jump to any hasty conclusion as the result of what I pointed out.”

She stamped her foot. Her heel left a deep mark in the soft soil.

“Oh, cut it out! Tell me just what you’re after.”

“I propose to go to the Honeck, as I do every afternoon. Really, one has only two walks here to choose from.”

She turned her back on him, started to walk away, swung round again.

“It was easier to come to terms with Mr. Thomas Fleischmann.”

“I haven’t the pleasure of knowing the gentleman in question.”

“What about Budapest? The *Continental*? Room 18, if I remember correctly.” Seeing his gesture of incomprehension, she added: “A hundred thousand francs? What? Not enough?”

“I can only repeat, you’re making some absurd mistake. I’ve never tried to extort money from anyone, and I’d never dream of doing so—especially from a woman.”

“Really? Still, that doesn’t alter the fact that somehow or other you fixed a frame-up, to get me suspected by my husband and the police.”

Stung by the insult, he went a shade paler.

“Madame, let me tell you that if a man had made a remark of that sort to me...”

“That’s a good one!” she laughed. “What about a certain Samuel Natanson who knocked Fleischmann down one evening in the *Continental* lounge?”

“I’ve never met either of these persons... But I can make allowances for the state of nerves you’re in. Naturally enough, considering what happened this morning... I was under suspicion, and all I did was to clear myself ; I brought no charges against anybody else. I merely pointed out some facts that the Inspector had overlooked. I’m extremely sorry if, in doing so, I’ve landed you in trouble, or even merely caused you annoyance.”

“Then a hundred thousand’s not enough?”

Again he made a gesture of expostulation.

“I’m not in need of money. And if I can do anything to help you out of a difficult position, you may count on me—and I won’t ask anything in return. The inquiry isn’t closed, you know.”

“So you’d help me to prove it wasn’t I who stole the money!” she exclaimed with an angry laugh. “Priceless! If you didn’t offer to do it for nothing, I might almost believe you.” She shot him a last malignant glance, a declaration of hostilities. “Thanks, but I’m afraid such unpaid services are apt to cost too dear. I prefer open war.”

She turned on her heel and started back towards the group of hotels ; the path ran downhill so steeply that she leant backwards as she walked.

As he lit a cigarette Monsieur Serge became vaguely aware that there was someone near. His eyes roved the green shadows.

“Eliane!” he exclaimed in amazement, catching sight of a girl standing beside a pine-tree.

His tone was gay, affectionate. He expected her to run towards him. But she gazed at him sullenly, with darkly accusing eyes.

“Have you been here long?”

“Too long!” She gave a slight shiver.

He made the first move. For a moment she seemed about to run away. She was a girl of sixteen, with a slim figure just ripening into womanhood. Thick English stockings, a short plaid skirt. She was hatless, and her hair rippled in the breeze.

“What do you mean, my dear?” he asked uncomfortably.

She gazed at him reproachfully, but did not answer.

“The lady you saw talking to me is a complete stranger,” he explained. “I was on my way to see your mother and—”

“Perhaps you’d better not come.”

A look of sadness, mingled with embarrassment, came into Monsieur Serge’s eyes.

“Anyone been to the chalet today?”

“Only the milkman.”

“What did he say?”

“You can guess...”

By stooping a little he could see, half hidden by the trees, the chalet, midway between the SchluchtPass and the Honeck: a fairly large wooden house in the Swiss style. From its windows one had a view right across Alsace to the silver windings of the Rhine and the dark bastion of the Black Forest.

Monsieur Serge started up the path that led to it. His head was bowed. After a moment he looked over his shoulder and called to Eliane:

“Aren’t you coming?”

She was leaning against a tree-trunk, sobbing. He was in half a mind to go back to her. Then he clicked his fingers impatiently, and walked on.

A strip of marble fixed to the gate bore the unassuming name : *Chalet des Pins*. A small garden, with gravel paths flanked by clumps of hydrangeas and rose-trees. At the top of the rise the chalet, with a veranda on each side.

The gardener, leaning on his spade, taking a rest, looked away when he saw the visitor opening the gate and sauntering up the path.

In an upper window a curtain stirred. The door opened as Monsieur Serge set foot on the first of the short flight of wooden steps. Madame Meurice's expression, as she greeted him, was almost as aloof as her daughter's had been.

"I didn't expect you today." Her tone had none of its usual warmth.

"I've just met Eliane."

"She's terribly upset. I'd have preferred her not to know, but unfortunately she was there when the milkman told me... I'm afraid she'll have a temperature again tonight."

"Still, she's getting better, isn't she?"

Madame Meurice gave a slight shrug, as though she preferred not to discuss the subject just then. She was a dark-eyed, rather placid-looking woman of about thirty-six, conscious perhaps of her charm but using it with shy discretion. She had the same ivory-white skin as her daughter, the same slender neck and distinctive, slightly prominent under-lip.

"Is it true?" The weariness in her voice told of the long hours she had spent pondering on that question.

"I've just proved conclusively to the police officer that I can't have been the thief... But I don't know what you've heard."

She wavered; certainly she asked for nothing better than to believe him. Unthinkingly she glanced towards the empty chair in which he always sat during his long, almost daily visits to the chalet. But today he avoided it and, without taking off his cape, remained leaning against the mantelpiece.

"Why didn't you let me know you were... short of money?"

"Ah, so you've been told?"

"Everything gets known in a little place like this; that's only natural, isn't it? " She seemed to be excusing the local busybodies as well as herself.

“Madame Keller had been watching you for some time, I’m told. Telling people that she wondered if you’d ever pay her bill.”

Madame Keller, who greeted him with honeyed smiles, fawned on him, scolded the young waitresses if they seemed to be neglecting him. “Hurry up, Lena! What’s come over you, Gretel? Don’t you see Monsieur Serge is waiting?”

“So,” Madame Meurice continued, “you can guess the sort of tittle-tattle that’s been going on...”

Only too easily! “What’s he up to here?” “Up to no good, that’s sure. Just you wait and see!” “Shouldn’t wonder if he’s a spy!”

She was blushing. Her eyes strayed to the window. Gray sky, a dense mist rolling up the valley like a cloud of smoke.

“I heard, too, that you went to Munster to sell a bracelet, but you didn’t sell it. They say you slept out that night and were seen at five in the morning roaming about near here. And that when you came back with the bus your pockets were stuffed with banknotes! I’m only telling you all this because you asked me to... I’d never have thought it would upset my daughter like that. She ran up to her bedroom and locked herself in. Later on she went out without telling me.”

Somebody was coming up the steps. Monsieur Serge went to the door and opened it abruptly. Eliane was standing outside, uncertain whether to enter or not. Her eyes were tear-stained.

“Come in, Eliane.”

He explained to her mother that she had happened to overhear his conversation with Madame Van der Laer. “I don’t know what she made of it,” he concluded.

After a moment’s silence he spoke again.

“Anyhow, the police inspector has definitely admitted that it wasn’t I who stole the money.”

But for some reason even this declaration failed to clear the air. Why, if he was innocent of the crime, should there be that look of sadness and suspicion in Madame Meurice’s eyes?

“Listen, Serge...”

He gave a slight start. She rarely addressed him by his Christian name, and never had done so before in her daughter’s hearing.

“I can speak in Eliane’s presence, as she heard what the milkman said. He came here less than half an hour ago, by the side-path. The Inspector...” She paused, glanced uneasily at her daughter, on whose pale cheeks were two small tell-tale patches of red. Then, with a sigh, she continued:

“It may be a trap. He’s been going round questioning people. He searched your luggage this morning. And it seems he was particularly keen on learning what languages you spoke, where you got your money from, what letters you received, and so on.”

Monsieur Serge said nothing, but he swallowed hard.

“I gather that he specially warned these people not to let you know of his inquiries. Oh, and there’s another thing. Madame Keller told the milkman that he noted down the makers’ names on your clothes.”

“I wonder why?”

“I don’t know... No, that’s not true. I’d better tell you all. Then you can act as you think best. He spent almost an hour showing round a sort of album he had with him. It contained photos and descriptions of persons wanted by the police. He pointed to a photo and asked everybody in turn: ‘Have you ever seen that man?’ ”

Monsieur Serge struck a match, raised it slowly to his lips. He was intimate enough here to smoke without asking leave. Blowing the match out, he tossed it into the fire.

“The milkman saw the photo. He said it looked like you but he couldn’t be sure.”

Monsieur Serge smiled. His eyes were fixed on a flower in the carpet which occupied the middle of the floor, surrounded by a wide expanse of pale blue tiles.

“He couldn’t read all that was written under the por-trait, but he did see what he took for the man’s name: ‘The Commodore.’ ”

“Was that all he had to say?”

“No. The Inspector made no secret of his hopes of bringing off a sensational *coup*. He said that the man was wanted in several countries and there were big rewards for information leading to his arrest. With the result that in the three hotels, not to mention the fancy-goods shop, everyone’s keeping watch on you.”

Monsieur Serge flicked off the ash of his cigarette into the grate, then said in a quiet voice:

“Do you know why Madame Van der Laer buttonholed me on the path just now?”

Eliane gazed at him with rapt attention.

“Well, let me tell you this to start with. If it wasn’t I who stole the money, it can only be she. All the circumstances point to her being the thief. She offered me a hundred thousand francs—presumably for me to take the blame and leave the country. And she pretended to think I was a man called Fleischmann whom she’d met at Budapest.”

He looked at Eliane, as if inviting her to bear him out.

“She went away in a temper—because I told her I’d never heard of Fleischmann, I hadn’t committed the theft, and I wasn’t short of money.”

“What about the money you brought back from your trip to Munster?” Eliane broke in impulsively.

There was melancholy in his smile, but tenderness as well. Hadn’t the eagerness in her voice betrayed an emotion of which she herself was, most likely, unaware? Her mother, too, had noticed it. She gave a slight start, lowered her eyes.

“All money,” he said deliberately, “isn’t stolen money.”

He listened. A car was driving up. A door slammed. Heavy footsteps sounded on the wooden steps.

“That must be the brewer.”

Eliane jumped up, ran out of the room and up the stairs.

A ring at the bell. Monsieur Serge didn’t move, nor did Madame Meurice. After a few moments the maid opened the door.

The man who entered was taller and bulkier than Monsieur Serge. He had coarse hands, gross lips, and looked as if he habitually over-ate.

Pretending not to see Monsieur Serge, he walked up to his hostess, pressed his fat lips to her hand, and said meaningly:

“I came at once, to make sure you weren’t being annoyed about this wretched business.”

“Very kind of you.”

He still ignored Monsieur Serge's presence. Handing his hat and overcoat to the maid, he took a cigar from his pocket—in which there was always an array of them, their tips protruding—and sat down, puffing and blowing.

A long silence followed: deliberate on the brewer's part—he was hoping to freeze out the “intruder”—apprehensive on the woman's. There was no sound but a light patter of footsteps in the next room, where the little maid, busy as an ant, was going about her work.

At last the brewer brought himself to speak.

“It's dangerous driving after last night's storm. There's three big pine-trees across the road half-way to Munster.”

Monsieur Serge walked slowly up to the lady of the house, was about to hold out his hand, but thought better of it and merely bowed, murmuring:

“I must be getting back.”

She made as if to rise, but he did not give her time. He was already opening the door.

He did not look back till he had reached the garden gate. Then he saw a curtain hastily drawn to—at Eliane's window.

Dusk had not yet fallen. The dismal light of a wet autumn afternoon lay on the forest. A sudden gust lifted the skirts of Monsieur Serge's cape; he had to wrestle with the wind to bring it back.

When he had left the chalet the light had been failing; in the living-room the shapes of things and people had been growing indistinct. As he gave it a last backward glance he saw the windows suddenly light up, and felt a vague thrill of relief.

Mightn't it be a tactful gesture on the part of Germaine—Madame Meurice? So long as he was there she hadn't noticed how dark the room was getting. Now she was alone with the thick-lipped brewer. He had the field to himself. So she'd rung for the maid and, without rising from her chair, had said:

“Bring the lamps, please, and close the shutters.”

One by one the servant drew them to, her white collarette flapping in the wind as she leaned out of each window in turn.

Monsieur Serge waited till the last was closed. Then he walked slowly down the path, his eyes fixed on the pebbles underfoot.

4. THE COMMODORE'S NOSE

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THE two lamps were far too feeble for the enormous room. Which was why the three tables used at night were always grouped together in the little zone of light beside the counter.

Monsieur and Madame Keller's table, Hertzfeld the engineer's, and that of Monsieur Serge.

Usually the talk was desultory, interrupted by the tinkle of forks and glasses, and the brisk footfalls of the two young waitresses.

Sometimes the girls could be heard whispering in the kitchen. "It's my turn." "Don't be so mean! You had yours at lunch."

For there was always keen competition between Gretel and Lena which should wait on Monsieur Serge. Gretel, a trifle fairer than her sister, had rather babyish features. Lena, whose figure was less developed, looked even younger.

"All right! You can bring him his dessert."

But that night Gretel and Lena had only sad, reproachful looks for their favorite. And the people at the other two tables carefully ignored his presence, though what they said was obviously meant for him, if indirectly.

Madame Keller said to the engineer:

"Really? You've never met our good friend Monsieur Kampf? Of course he usually calls here when you're away at work. He's the biggest brewer in these parts, you know. Made a pot of money, four or five million francs at least. It's his beer you're drinking now."

From the corner of an eye she was watching Monsieur Serge.

"He started as a drayman; then he married his employer's daughter. I've been told she had to marry him—you can guess why. Now he's a widower, but I rather think he'll be marrying again quite soon, and the second Madame Kampf will be the lady at the chalet."

Her expression wasn't exactly spiteful, but it was tenser than the topic called for. One could see she was deliberately getting at Monsieur Serge, perhaps paying off an old score.

“They should suit each other, anyhow,” she added. “A widow and a widower.”

“She has a daughter, hasn’t she?” put in the engineer. “The girl comes to the mill sometimes to watch the saws at work. Quite a pretty young thing. If I were your friend Kampf, I’d rather marry the daughter than the mother.”

“Oh, the mother’s quite presentable. A bit la-di-da, perhaps. I believe they’ve come down in the world. When her husband was alive, I’m told, they had a chauffeur, butler, and all the rest of it. The girl didn’t go to school ; she had an English governess. That’s all I have against them, they put on airs. They’d never dream of setting foot inside this place. Still, that doesn’t alter the fact that one of these days Madame Meurice will marry a man who used to drive a brewer’s dray.”

Though his table was only a few feet from the others’, Monsieur Serge was as isolated as if he’d been in another room. He ate without a sound, plying knife and fork with a dexterity which always roused Gretel’s and Lena’s admiration. It was a treat, they said, to watch him. He could negotiate the trickiest chicken-bone with consummate ease, impale each morsel on his fork at exactly the right angle, making a slight, graceful forward movement of his head as he brought it to his lips.

“I expect they’ll keep the chalet when they’re married and use it for their holidays. I reckon he’ll train his wife to be a bit less stand-offish, and a good thing too! He’s a business man first and foremost, and we’re good customers. He knows that, and he’ll never pass this place without dropping in for a chat. Hullo! There’s Fredel.”

The porter from the *Grand* had just entered. He often looked in at night for a talk and a glass of beer. A tall, red-haired young man, with a broad Alsatian accent. He spent most of the day hanging round the big notice-board opposite the petrol-pump, on which were set forth the principal walks and beauty-spots. As soon as a char-à-banc drew up, Fredel would saunter towards it, his hands in his pockets, and wait some moments, grinning sheepishly. Then, without looking at the passengers, he would rattle off his piece:

“This, ladies and gentlemen, is the SchluchtPass, formerly the German frontier. Twelve hundred and thirty meters above sea-level. Lovely views across Alsace. WhiteLake and BlackLake twelve kilometers away. You see in front of you the stump of the German boundary-pillar which the French

broke when they came here. Special reduced terms for a long stay.” Then he would back away, his eyes still fixed on the wheels of the car.

“A glass of beer, Lena.” He had taken a seat near the Kellers’ table. Nick asked in *patois*:

“Any new people at your place?”

“No. The Dutch couple are staying on. And they’re a proper nuisance, I can tell you. First they made us have the hole in the wall bricked up. Then they weren’t satisfied with the furniture in their suite, and went through all the other rooms picking out what they wanted. They’re always ordering special dishes. And that chauffeur of theirs, he’s worse than they are. Why, he refused to eat with us in the kitchen!

“And the trunk-calls they want putting through at all hours! To Brussels, Amsterdam, Paris. They expect the whole staff to dance attendance on them. Ringing their bells from morn till night.

“At dinner they had a fine old rumpus! The woman jumped up in a tearing rage and locked herself in, in her room.”

From a corner of his eye Fredel was watching Monsieur Serge, but didn’t dare to speak to him... Yet how many drinks they’d had together in this room, he and Monsieur Serge and Nick!

“Is it true the police are coming back?”

“So I hear,” replied Madame Keller. “The inquiry’s still going on.”

Lena, who was handing a cake to Monsieur Serge, hesitated, then picked a piece of white thread off his back. With a childish pout—that thread could only have come from the chalet—she flounced out of the restaurant, saying to her sister in a stage whisper:

“*You* give him his coffee, Gretel!”

In the past a genial atmosphere had prevailed after dinner, everybody joining in the conversation. After Madame Keller had gone to bed, the men stayed on talking, or, at Nick’s suggestion, joined in a game of cards. Meanwhile the two girls settled down in a corner to peel potatoes or shell peas for the next day’s meals...

Monsieur Serge rose. There was an awkward moment. Madame Keller remained icily aloof, but Nick and Fredel were obviously ashamed of their behavior.

“Good night, all,” he said. “Lena, would you give me my candle, please?”

It was the first time he hadn’t had a glass of Alsatian liqueur before going up to bed.

They heard footsteps on the stairs, the sound of a closing door. There was a moment’s silence in the restaurant. Then Nick Keller heaved a deep sigh.

“It’s just too bad! If only it had been somebody else... !”

At ten next morning a traveler alighted from the bus that came from Gérardmer. What specially drew attention to him was that he walked straight to the *Relais d’Alsace*, carrying his suitcase, and settled down in a corner without making inquiries about a room.

“Will you be having lunch, sir?” Madame Keller asked.

“Probably. I’m waiting for someone.”

“Is he coming by the bus from Munster?”

“No.”

That closed the conversation. The man opened his suitcase, took out a folder containing some typewritten sheets which, after ordering sausages and beer in guise of breakfast, he fell to perusing.

A plump, boyish-looking little fellow, with nondescript features which a fluffy yellow mustache made still more indeterminate.

He had not once gazed at the view. Seated at a window, with his elbow brushing the geraniums, he looked up from his reading only to cast now and again a fretful glance at the clock when, at each half-hour, it played its little tinkling tune.

Monsieur Serge had gone out for his usual morning walk. The Van de Laers’ car was standing at the entrance of the *Grand*. There was no luggage in it, which showed that its owners had in view only a drive to some place in the neighborhood.

A little later a motor-cycle fussed up the hill and stopped at the *Relais*.

Inspector Mercier got off it, walked up to the new-comer and shook hands with him. There was a shade of deference in his manner.

“Have you been here long, Superintendent? Sorry to be late. Just as I was starting, Berlin rang up. They’ve given us a reply about... Hope you had a pleasant journey.”

The rest of the conversation was carried on in undertones. Madame Keller, who, seated at her desk, was pretending to be busy with her accounts, couldn't catch a word. Not till a quarter of an hour later did either of the men address her.

"Is Monsieur Morrow out?"

"He'll be back any moment. It's about the time he always has a short drink before lunch."

The two men started whispering again. There was a rustle of paper, the scratching of a pen.

The plump little man was Superintendent Labbé of the Paris C.I.D.

"I may have made a mistake," Inspector Mercier was saying. "Still, I felt it my duty to inform my Chief, and he got in touch with Paris at once. Is it a fact that you've arrested the Commodore twice?"

"Yes. The first time was ten years ago, the second only four years ago—at Nice."

"And he was acquitted?"

"He wasn't even sent up for trial. At Nice he went under the name of Morton; the whole American colony knew him, and they vouched for him to a man. There was a Mrs. Morton, too, in those days: a great gowk of an American, dripping with diamonds, who drank champagne by the bucketful."

"Ah," sighed the Inspector a little enviously, "we don't get big cases of that sort at Strasburg. What had the Commodore been up to?"

"Oh, his usual little game—he must have brought it off dozens of times. He settled down at the best hotel with his wife, splashed money about. He ran big banks at the baccarat tables in the Casino, and cut a figure in what passes for High Society on the Riviera. He had hosts of friends, of course; amongst them a certain Monsieur Nitti—a 'mystery man' the papers would call him. Well, one evening the Commodore and Nitti were putting down champagne, with an Egyptian who'd come to Nice that morning. Presently up comes a man and hands Nitti an envelope, which Nitti opens in his friends' presence. A wad of thousand-franc notes drops out.

" 'Is it your broker sending me this money?' asks Nitti of the Commodore.

" 'Sure! It's your share of the profits on our deal in oil.' "

Inspector Mercier was listening, his mouth agape.

"I don't see how..." he began.

"Wait. Morton walks off, Nitti and the Egyptian go on talking. Nitti starts in about his old pal Morton, who's a big business man in the States and has all sorts of inside information about stocks and shares. 'Morton,' he says, 'put me on to this deal in oil. I've netted half a million within three days. If he takes a liking to you, he might do the same for you.'

"So now our Egyptian has only one idea in his head— how to get a tip from this financial wizard. Morton lets himself be talked round. But he won't let his friend risk money on anything short of a cert. A week goes by. Then Nitti comes and tells the Egyptian: 'Our chance has come. A dead snip. Morton's putting up five millions, I'm putting up two. We need ten millions in all. Are you game for the balance?'

"The Egyptian has money in a Marseilles bank. The three men go there in a car. Morton has a wallet with him, in which, he says, are the seven millions. The Egyptian draws the money, and it's put into the wallet with the rest.

"By now it's lunch-time. They have lunch together at *Pascal's*. At two o'clock Morton says to Nitti:

" 'Suppose you trot round to my broker's right away and pay the money in. Then we can have our coffee in peace. Mind you tell him it's cover for the deal I talked to him about.'

"So off goes Nitti. They have their coffee. A liqueur or two. Four o'clock comes. Morton's looking worried.

" 'If you'll excuse me, I'll ring up my broker to find out what's keeping our friend.'

"He comes back from the call-box white as a sheet. He grits his teeth and says:

" 'We've been "had"! That fellow Nitti's a crook, he didn't pay in the money. The broker hasn't set eyes on him.' "

Superintendent Labbé winked; lit a small cigar.

"The good old confidence trick! Nitti, needless to say, has vanished into thin air; ditto the Egyptian's money. Morton lodges a complaint against him. And that's that... I put Morton through it, but there was no shaking his defence. He played the innocent victim. He even offered a bonus of two

thousand francs to the police if we caught Nitti. Three weeks later he left Nice, and we lost all trace of him. Obviously he'd joined Nitti in some foreign country and shared the spoils. The alleged Mrs. Morton was a young woman he'd hired to act the part for a few weeks. He makes a fresh start each time, never uses the same confederates twice. He's played the same trick at Marienbad, Beirut, Calcutta. And he's never given the police a chance of nabbing him—in fact, they've been obliged to apologize to him on several occasions!

“For, while it was impossible to prove he was a crook, it was equally impossible to prove that the Commodore at Nice was the same man who'd been arrested at Vienna eight years before, at London in 1921, and at Amsterdam in '23.

“What's more, the Egyptian himself refused to lodge a complaint against him. He said it was absurd to suspect a perfect gentleman like the Commodore. Can you guess why? Morton put half a million francs at his disposal to help him to tide over his financial difficulties.”

The Superintendent ceased speaking, raised his pale blue eyes towards his colleague.

“Supposing it's he!” murmured the Inspector, thrilled by the prospect of arresting a master-criminal.

Someone was coming down the road: Monsieur Serge in his old green cape, swinging his knobbly walking-stick, strolling down from the Honeck. He paused for a moment to admire the Packard, then turned into the *Relais d'Alsace*.

Gretel was dusting the tables, Lena laying the tablecloths for lunch. Nick Keller was in the kitchen, cracking jokes with the cook.

The door opened. Monsieur Serge stamped his feet to shake off the mud. He caught sight of the Inspector, nodded to him and, as he was unfastening his cape, inquired:

“After me again?”

To Gretel he said: “A vermouth, please, my dear.”

Mercier did not look towards him, but watched the Superintendent's face, all eagerness to note his first impressions as to the man's identity.

“Introduce me,” said Monsieur Labbé.

“As... ?” He was doubtful whether he should mention the Superintendent’s official position. The latter took matters into his own hands.

“I’m Superintendent Labbé of the C.I.D. Will you do us the favor of sitting at our table?” With his plump little hand he neatly swept back his papers into the folder.

“Have you come all the way from Paris for this case?” Monsieur Serge’s voice betrayed no emotion. Then he sank on to a chair, and sighed: “I’m afraid I overdid it. Seven miles on an empty stomach...”

“Oh, come now! You’ve done more than that in the Carpathians.”

The Inspector was patently unequal to the situation. He was young, unskilled to hide his feelings. Just then his eyes said, as clearly as words: “That’s got you on the raw! How’re you going to answer *that*?”

Quite calmly Monsieur Serge turned and gazed at Superintendent Labbé. His pale, slightly fleshy face was drawn. At that moment he looked quite old. More than old, a sick man. A man who is under treatment, worried about his heart, the workings of his liver, or kidneys.

“The Carpathians?” he repeated in a puzzled tone.

“Well, the Alps, if you prefer. You’re a great traveler, I believe.”

“Hardly that. I’m just an ordinary sort of fellow with a small income and a taste for change, who’s managed to get about the world a bit.”

“Under different names—Morton, Fleischmann, Véricourt, amongst others.”

“Thank you, Gretel.” Monsieur Serge took his glass of vermouth, then turned to the police officer.

“I suppose your remarks are made with some definite object. But I hope you won’t mind my telling you that I simply can’t follow them.” His tone was mild, courteously apologetic. “I’ve always had the name of Morrow; it was my father’s name and I’ve never had reason to be ashamed of it, or the least desire to change it. I can only conclude there’s been some sort of mistake and...”

The Superintendent seemed to have ceased listening. He was leaning across the table and his eyes were only a foot away from Monsieur Serge’s face. He was gazing at it like a man proposing to remove a speck of grit from a friend’s eye.

Monsieur Serge submitted to the scrutiny good-humoredly, only murmuring:

“Really now! What on earth... ?”

“Have you never had an accident?”

“No. Why?”

“At Hamburg, let’s say.”

Monsieur Serge looked frankly bewildered.

“Never had your nose grazed by a revolver bullet?” the Superintendent asked.

Monsieur Serge rose to his feet.

“I’m extremely sorry, gentlemen, but I still fail to understand what you’re driving at. First, I was accused of a theft which it was physically impossible for me to have committed. Today you’re suggesting that I’ve traveled in the Carpathians and been shot at in Hamburg. Really! I got my feet wet crossing a stream just now, and I hope you’ve no objection to my going upstairs to change my shoes.”

The Superintendent signified that he had no objection.

No sooner had the door closed than the Inspector asked eagerly:

“Well?”

“Can’t say.”

“Is it he?”

The Superintendent made a non-committal gesture. Then he said:

“Yes and no. I mean, this man’s older-looking, less spry, altogether more bourgeois than the Commodore. The Commodore had *class*, he was a live wire—you couldn’t help noticing it. This fellow looks like a ‘tired business man’ who’s thrown up his job and fusses about his health. Not to mention that he hasn’t a scar.”

“Has the Commodore a scar?”

“Yes. He had his nose pretty nearly shot off, at Hamburg.”

“So your conclusion is... ? ”

“I’ve come to none, so far. Anyhow, I’ll stay on here a day or two. By the way, was it he who suggested that test—with the hole in the wall, I mean?”

“Yes. I’d looked at the hole. But it didn’t strike me to try if it was possible to reach the attaché-case by putting one’s arm through it.”

In his bedroom Monsieur Serge, after changing his shoes, was slowly washing his hands.

“Is it possible to remove all traces of a scar?” the Inspector asked.

“So as to deceive ordinary eyes, yes. But not a surgeon’s.”

“In that case—”

Superintendent Labbé bridled.

“Ah, but don’t forget I’ve almost a surgeon’s eye!”

“Well?”

“There’s no scar. All the same...”

There was a short silence. Gretel was dusting the next table noiselessly, eavesdropping. The Superintendent completed his phrase.

“All the same, I could swear it’s he.” He turned to Gretel. “What have you in the way of short drinks?”

“What would you like, sir?”

“Anything. Some port.”

“Sorry, sir, we haven’t any.”

“Vermouth, then.”

Monsieur Serge’s glass was still on the table. While Gretel went to the counter, Superintendent Labbé said thoughtfully:

“Yes, a sort of cheap edition of the Commodore. Seedy. Hard-up.” The association of such epithets with the Commodore made him smile. For the Inspector’s enlightenment he added: “The man’s reputed to have made over thirty millions by his various swindles.”

Footsteps on the stairs. Monsieur Serge’s legs came into view.

“You’ll be able to go back to Strasburg immediately after lunch,” said Labbé to his colleague. “I’ll only ask you to step across with me to the *Grand* for a moment, to have another look at the Van der Laers’ rooms. What sort of people are they?”

“Oh, quite superior people, very rich...”

Those were the only words that Monsieur Serge caught, for the two police officers were already on their way out.

He was evidently short of shoes, for to replace his wet ones he had put on a pair of pumps.

5. DECLINE AND FALL

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NEXT day being Saturday, the *Relais d'Alsace* started at an early hour preparing for the week-end rush. Nick arrayed himself in a clean coat and trimmed his beard to a point—which gave him a quaintly faun-like air. The telephone was kept busy, Madame Keller hustled the kitchen staff.

“How many chops? Twenty-four? And five pounds of sausage-meat? Right!”

Gretel and Lena were emptying buckets of soap-suds on to the tiled floor of the restaurant and scrubbing it vigorously.

The baker was the first arrival. At nine precisely he dumped a basketful of rolls on one of the tables and a pile of ring-shaped cakes on another.

“Well, Nick, how’s things with you?”

“What’s the latest at your end?”

“Oh, nothing much. I hear the Railwaymen’s Musical Club will be coming here tomorrow in two charas.”

Another van drew up outside, the pork-butcher’s from Gérardmer. A man wearing striped overalls alighted, stumped in, shook hands with Nick, and slapped the baker on the back.

“Ah, you’ve got here first, you damned old dough-merchant!... Good morning, Monsieur Serge. Not feeling ill, I hope?”

For Monsieur Serge was sitting all by himself in a corner, waiting until the scrubbing operations were over round his table. He was keeping so quiet one hardly noticed he was there.

“Liver trouble, ain’t it?” the pork-butcher went on genially. “I know something A1 for that. I’ll send you a bottle.”

Usually a Saturday was Monsieur Serge’s heyday. He knew all the tradesfolk delivering goods, the char-à-banc drivers and the week-end “regulars.” He watched the food piling up on the tables, observed Madame Keller as she sniffed trussed fowls and prodded Alsatian cakes with an expert finger.

Also he usually stood a round or two of drinks.

The latest gossip from Munster, Colmar, Gérardmer was bandied round...Not to mention secrets of the *Grand Hotel*.

“What have they ordered over the way?” Madame Keller never failed to inquire.

“Six calves’ brains and a leg of mutton.”

“Only six brains for eighteen people! I wonder they’ve the nerve... !”

Glasses were polished crystal-clear, the geraniums watered. At noon Gretel and Lena, wet and grimy, their ringlets sticking to their foreheads, rose to their feet at last, proudly surveyed their handiwork, replaced their clogs by slippers, and hurried off to dress.

That Saturday Monsieur Serge took no part in the life of the household. He was holding a newspaper, but it was impossible to say if he was reading it.

Everybody was eyeing him furtively. Everybody, too, seemed down in the mouth. It was as if they all had been infected by his moodiness.

The truth was, everyone was in the dark. On the previous day the two police officers had had a long interview with the Van der Laers at the *Grand*. Then Inspector Mercier had rushed off to Munster, where he had a case to investigate.

At sunset Superintendent Labbé had been seen to walk a little way up the road. Fredel had followed him. For quite a while they had stood there talking in the afterglow.

When he came to the *Relais* that evening, Fredel had kept his own counsel. “He asked me some questions,” was the most he would divulge.

Monsieur Serge was in the restaurant. Somehow they didn’t dare to talk in whispers. Finally, the situation had got so much on Nick’s nerves that he had walked up to Monsieur Serge.

“What about a game of backgammon?”

His wife frowned. Her nerves, too, were on edge. The Superintendent showed no sign of coming back. One of the chambermaids from the *Grand* had been seen going up the road to talk to him. Next it was the turn of one of the waitresses to be interviewed.

What made it all so worrying was that nobody knew how things stood, and that Monsieur Serge persisted in sitting on as usual after dinner. Tactless, Madame Keller thought it.

He had had a game of backgammon. The Superintendent had come in about ten, written three long letters, gone out and posted them himself

before retiring to his room.

Madame Keller was the next to go upstairs. Nick and his companion had the big room to themselves.

“By the way,” said Nick, as he rattled the dice, “don’t take too much notice of the way my missus goes on. You know how she is.” After a moment’s thought he added: “Me, I take folks as I find ’em. I don’t care if your name’s Morrow, or who you really are... What about another spot of mirabelle?” Then with a leer he added: “What do you think of that bit of stuff across the way? I bet she leads the Dutchman of hers a rare old dance...”

The following day promised to be even gloomier than its predecessor. Towards nine, Van der Laer was seen walking towards the Honeck in full mountaineering kit. Five minutes later, Labbé strolled across to the *Grand* to have another talk with Madame Van der Laer.

Fredel paced up and down the road waiting for the char-à-bancs. Nick, as usual, was having drinks with the delivery men.

“How’s your new van doing?... Is it true what I heard about old Pierre—that he overloaded his lorry and got stuck half-way up the hill?”

A car lurched to a halt: a shabby touring-car, with a faded hood. Kampf, the brewer, got out, fat calves bulging the leather gaiters, his round paunch well to the fore, his face more flushed than ever. After feeling the radiator, he went into the *Relais*.

“Put a jug of cold water in the radiator, my pet.”

He patted Gretel’s head, and shook Nick’s hand with the patronizing air of a lord of all he surveys.

“How’s business?”

“Fairish.”

“The dray’ll be here presently with the six barrels... Good morning, Madame Keller. Busy with your accounts as usual?”

But it was Monsieur Serge his beady eyes were hunting for. When they lit on him he said nothing, but his face lit up.

“I rather think that one of these days I’ll have a great piece of news for you, Madame Keller. Something you never dreamt of. What’s the time? Have you put the water in the radiator? Yes? That’s a good girl. Here’s

something to buy a pretty ribbon with.” With a lordly gesture he handed Gretel fifty centimes.

“What’s wrong with the little girls today? Has that old scoundrel Nick been working them too hard?” he grinned. “Well, I must be off. Now, Madame Keller, get ready for that big surprise. I’m not giving anything away, but— have a squint inside my car when I’m on the way back.”

He gave Nick a dig in the ribs and lumbered out, puffing and blowing, after a final glance at Monsieur Serge.

“He’s going to Madame Meurice again,” remarked Nick, who was standing in the doorway, leaning on his crutch.

“Why shouldn’t he? He’s a widower, and she’s a widow. A good match.”

“Unless it’s the daughter he’s after!” Nick grinned. “Nice little piece she is! Consumptive, of course. But that old devil’s got enough health for two.”

The postman came next. The usual glass of Alsatian wine. Monsieur Serge watched him sorting the letters, with an air of expectancy. But there was nothing for him.

The tide of soap-suds was lapping his corner.

“Wouldn’t you rather move?” said Lena. “Wait. Wipe your shoes on my duster.” She blushed, as now she always did when she had occasion to speak to him.

“There’s Kampf coming back,” Nick announced. “Why, bless my soul, he has the two ladies with him!”

Monsieur Serge rose. Through the diamond panes he saw Madame Meurice in the seat beside the driver, and had a fleeting glimpse of Eliane in the back of the car. But it was only the brewer who turned to look at the *Relais*— with a large, self-satisfied leer.

“So much for his famous surprise! There’ll be wedding-bells before the month is out.” Madame Keller shrugged her shoulders, to indicate her disdain for the brewer’s choice.

“She’s no chicken, but I will say she’s kept her looks. Mighty smart she is today in that white costume and black hat.”

“They’re as poor as church mice,” his wife retorted. “Ask the butcher. Half a pound of meat twice a week, that’s all they take. Never an undercut; only scrag-ends and so forth. And they’ve the maid and gardener to feed as well as themselves. Still, that doesn’t prevent her looking right through you

when you meet her on the road, and she'd never dream of going out without a hat on... Do you know, they've been getting their milk and butter from the farm for three years now, and they've never once bought a fowl!"

"Oh, Kampf has money enough for two—or three for that matter. Shouldn't wonder if it's the idea of having the brace of 'em—the old 'un and the kid—at the same time, that's taken his fancy." His eyes were sparkling. "Hullo! There's his dray. Open the trap-door, girls."

The barrels of beer were unloaded, rolled to the trapdoor, lowered on pulleys into the cellar.

"Is it a fact your boss is going to marry the dame at the chalet?" Nick asked.

"That I don't know. But he's looking mighty pleased with himself this morning, and he told me he was going to do a good stroke of business today. Know where they're off to? I passed them on the way here. To the notary. Kampf's buying the chalet, lock, stock, and barrel, from the lady. Dirt cheap. Sixty thousand francs, so our cashier told me."

"Sixty thousand!" Madame Keller exclaimed. "Why, when the Meurices came here four years ago, it was Kampf himself who sold them the property—for eighty thousand!"

The drayman winked.

"That's the boss all over. No flies on *him*!"

Nick glanced at Monsieur Serge, who was listening and had turned quite pale.

"A little drink?" he suggested to the drayman, who spat on the floor before raising the glass to his lips.

"Aye, he's had 'em good and proper! D'you know, it's he who bought up most of the shares of Meurice & Co., so I've heard. As things stand, the lady must be pretty nearly on the rocks; if the boss weren't buying the chalet for cash, she'd have been sold up within the month. The usual story. Them that has the money makes more, and them that hasn't... By the way, is it a fact you're having an annex built behind your place?"

"Next spring, perhaps, we'll start building," said Madame Keller, not without pride.

The drayman eyed respectfully the tables on which beer and Alsatian wine were served on a scale to warrant such expenditure.

“Well, well!” he sighed. “Someone’s got to rake it in, I guess...”

When Nick looked again at Monsieur Serge, his head was buried in his hands and he was staring at the floor.

Suddenly he asked:

“How long would it take to get to Munster in the brewer’s car?”

“Under an hour. He drives hell for leather, especially when he has a lady with him to show off to!”

“Would you drive me there?”

There was a moment of intense embarrassment. Then the drayman muttered apologetically:

“I wouldn’t mind doing it in the ordinary way. Only, for one thing, it’s Saturday... And didn’t the Superintendent tell you you was to stay here?”

For the first time Monsieur Serge was seen to give way to emotion. He wrung his hands.

“Who is the notary?”

“Maître Aupetit,” Nick said. “The one who sold us this hotel.”

There was no telephone box at the *Relais*. The telephone was in a passage leading to the lavatory. It had no window, so the door was always left ajar.

“Hullo! Put me on to Maître Aupetit. What? Ten minutes to wait? Can’t you possibly manage... ? No?”

He fell to pacing up and down the room, so lost in thoughts that he didn’t notice when he trod on the wet patch where the girls were washing. So agitated did he seem that Gretel was too shy to draw his attention to it.

The telephone bell had not yet rung when Labbé came back from the *Grand*. With a nod to Monsieur Serge he settled down in his corner and, as usual, started writing letters.

Madame Keller asked tentatively:

“Still want to make that call, Monsieur Serge?”

He evidently did, for just then the telephone rang and he went to it at once, not even troubling to close the passage door.

“Yes, I want to speak to Maître Aupetit himself. Please ask him to come to the ’phone. It’s very urgent.”

Everyone in the restaurant pricked up his ears. Madame Keller scowled furiously at Gretel, who was going on cleaning the floor with great sweeps of her scrubbing-brush.

“Is that Maître Aupetit? Has Madame Meurice come yet? What? Oh, she’s just arrived. Nothing signed yet? Good. You can speak freely; I know all about it. No, there’s no mystery. My name? Serge Morrow. Yes, Morrow.

“Excuse me, but it’s your duty to hear me out. You’re selling Madame Meurice’s chalet. Yes, I know all about it. As Madame Meurice is a client of yours, it’s your business to sell it at the highest price obtainable. That’s so, isn’t it? Well, I offer fifty per cent more than your buyer, Monsieur Kampf. Never mind the price. Half as much again.

“What’s that? But surely... Well, I...”

In the restaurant they noticed that his tone was becoming less confident; he sounded almost abject.

“Sorry, I can’t furnish a guarantee right away—over the ’phone. All I ask is for you to hold things up for forty-eight hours. What? It can’t be done? Well, twenty-four hours then. No, I told you I couldn’t give a banker’s reference. What?... Don’t cut me off, mademoiselle! Maître Aupetit, please be good enough to listen to what I have to say. I’m speaking from the *Relais d’Alsace*, and I can’t at a moment’s notice... What’s that? Wait! Let’s say Monday, first thing in the morning. Yes, in cash.

“Really, Maître Aupetit, do please be reasonable. The most I can give you right away is four or five thousand francs. Wait a bit, though! I’ve a platinum bracelet, too, that’s worth thirty thousand. On Monday, I promise you.

“Don’t cut me off! I undertake... Wait! Mademoiselle, you’ve cut us off. What? Oh, it’s the notary who hung up?”

A long silence followed. Not a sound could be heard in the restaurant. Then Madame Keller had the presence of mind to signal to Gretel to carry on with her scrubbing.

Monsieur Serge came back at the exact moment when the bristles of the scrubbing-brush began again to rasp across the tiles.

He looked a broken man. His scanty hair was in disorder, as if he had been running his fingers through it the wrong way. He cast a tired, unseeing

glance at Labbé, then sank into a chair and stared in front of him with listless eyes.

Through the window he could see a strip of road, the terrace, the scarlet petrol-pump of the *Grand Hotel*.

As the clock chimed half-past eleven a bus-load of excursionists drew up outside. The squeal of brakes was quickly followed by the usual influx.

“Any good draught beer? Real Alsatian beer?”

Hastily wiping their hands on their aprons, Gretel and Lena left their pails and scrubbing-brushes.

“Five beers. One Alsatian wine. One Dubonnet.”

The new-comers explored the room, inspected the stuffed birds. Propped up on his crutch beside the umbrella-stand, Nick began explaining for the thousandth time:

“It’s a bit of the old frontier boundary-post. The stump’s over there, in front of the door. Before the war the *Relais d’Alsace* had two ways out—one into France, the other into Germany.”

The tourists solemnly inspected the historic stump, wagging their heads. A bespectacled gentleman shouted to his son:

“Don’t moon about like that! Come and look at the old Boche boundary-post.”

The bus conductor shook hands with Nick.

“There’s three more coming up the road. And you’ll have another lot this afternoon. An excursion train from Brussels is due in at three.”

He surveyed his passengers, made sure that all had had their drinks, then went back to the bus and sounded the horn peremptorily. When his flock was gathered round him he announced:

“We’re going up the Honeck now. Fifteen hundred meters above sea-level. Lunch on the terrace with a splendid view across Alsace. Take your seats, please.”

As three more bus-loads might be in at any moment, Madame Keller deigned to help the girls to clear away the empty glasses.

“Tap another cask of beer,” said Nick.

Monsieur Serge had not moved. He was still staring straight in front of him.

“Hurry up, Gretel and Lena!” Madame Keller commanded. “Get those buckets out of the way. And tidy yourselves up. You’re sights!”

In an elegant white flannel costume Madame Van der Laer came strolling languidly out of the *Grand Hotel*. She looked like someone who has just got out of bed. After darting a glance at the windows of the *Relais* she took a few steps up the road. Then she returned and settled down under a mauve-and-yellow sunshade planted on the terrace.

Fredel hurried forward to light the cigarette she had taken from a jade cigarette-case, becoming extremely flustered when twice in succession the wind blew his match out. In his confusion he dropped the match-box and retreated, flushed and crestfallen.

The woman had chosen a seat exactly in Monsieur Serge’s line of sight. He rose, moved to the door and stood there, grasping the handle, his eyes intent on her.

6. THE THREE DOORS

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FOR a tense moment Madame Van der Laer and Monsieur Serge observed each other. Then he turned the handle, stepped out on to the road, and halted again.

There was no mistaking what she wanted. Her eyes were summoning him to come to her, aggressively—daring him to come!

A sunbeam slipping past the sunshade fell on her shoulder. She didn’t move. And it seemed that a dramatic clash was impending between her and the man who now approached, a troubled look on his face.

When he was only a few steps off she indulged in the malicious pleasure of turning away, then looking round and feigning surprise to see him.

“Do you wish to speak to me?” she asked.

It took place in public. Everybody, including the Superintendent, could see Monsieur Serge standing in front of the woman, who was talking to him as she would to a servant.

“As a matter of fact, I thought it was *you* who had something to say to me.”

His voice had lost its edge. And he seemed conscious that he was bound to get the worst of it.

“So you’ve not been arrested yet?”

A painful spectacle. The man daunted, depressed; the woman lolling in her chair, flaunting her beauty, taking a cruel delight in baiting him. As painful as the sight of children tormenting a chained-up animal; the larger and stronger the animal is, the more humiliated it seems, and the more distressing is the sight.

“Nor have you,” was all he found to answer.

“Ah, I see they’ve not troubled to let you know the latest developments. Sit down. It gets on my nerves seeing you standing there like a dummy.” She pointed to a small, uncomfortable iron chair.

He sat down. She gazed at him, reveling in the situation, her eyes half-closed like a contented cat’s. She was looking her showy best, and knew it. Exquisitely dressed. Lavishly bejeweled. In the yard her chauffeur was polishing the Packard. The sun was shining, and beside her was a man she hated—at her mercy.

She could taunt him to her heart’s content. And she had an audience. From the *Relais d’Alsace* ten people were observing the scene with eager eyes.

She dropped her handkerchief, just for the satisfaction of watching Monsieur Serge pick it up, almost touching her feet with his forehead as he did so.

“The Superintendent will arrest you before the day’s out. I’d warned you. The way you bluffed the Inspector with your famous ‘demonstration’ in my husband’s bedroom was a neat piece of work. So neat that for a time it took me off my guard. You were a fool not to press home your advantage while you had the chance... Would you call the waiter?”

To do so he had to rise and go to the restaurant door.

“Waiter, will you bring me one Rose Cocktail. With very little gin, please.” Noticing that the man lingered, as if expecting Monsieur Serge to give an order too, she repeated: “*One* cocktail, I said.”

“Is that all you have to tell me?” Monsieur Serge realized that this little by-play had been staged for the purpose of humiliating him.

“Want to go already? I’d have thought you’d like to learn how it is the tables have been turned—that you’re suspected now instead of me.”

He was looking up the road, as if expecting to see the brewer’s car appear at any moment.

“Put the glass there, waiter. Thanks... You remember the arrangement of our suite, don’t you? Three rooms opening into each other, each with a door on to the passage. The Inspector ascertained that while my husband was away all three doors were closed. And as no lock had been forced he assumed that no one could have got in.” She paused, obviously relishing the situation. “So he jumped to the conclusion that the thief must have put his arm through the hole in the wall. You proved, by a practical demonstration, that it couldn’t be done. Which ruled you out—apparently. It looked as if I was the only person who could have stolen the money. That’s correct, isn’t it? Well, as I said, there’s been a new development. We had another ‘practical demonstration’ an hour or two ago.”

Two char-à-bancs drew up, disgorged a noisy crowd of trippers.

“The three doors were fastened right enough. But they were secured in different ways... Good! You’re beginning to look interested !... The door of my room was locked and the key was on the inside; it was bolted too. My husband’s room was locked and he had taken the key away with him. That door couldn’t be bolted as well, as he locked it from the outside. So we come to the third door, the door of the sitting-room between our two bedrooms. Do you remember how that door was closed?”

She was gloating. Her eyes were bright with triumph as they lingered on the motley crowd swarming round the big blue char-à-bancs.

“The bolt had been pushed to. And the door locked as well. But the key had been left *on the outside*. Still, as the Inspector stated in his report, it was impossible to get into the room. My room was locked and bolted. My husband’s locked. The middle door bolted. There was only one thing left to try—to see if the key of the middle door fitted the lock of my husband’s door.

“Well, it fitted perfectly! So all the theories about the hole in the wall and the theft having been committed by someone inside the suite went by the board. All the thief had to do was walk up the passage, take the middle key, unlock my husband’s door, rip the attaché-case open, and sneak out again. Then lock my husband’s door and put the key back where he found it.”

Monsieur Serge showed no emotion; he gave the impression of a man who ponders over a problem that doesn't concern him personally.

"So you still won't face the facts? Can't you see that everything points to your being the thief? You were out all night. On the evening before you hadn't a sou; the morning after the theft you were in funds. You professed to have gone to Munster, but you were seen near the hotel about the time the theft took place. But that's not all. I took the trouble to look through the Visitors' Book at this hotel and ask the proprietor some questions. Well, when you first came here, five months ago, you stayed at the *Grand* for a week before moving over the way. And the room you had was Number 9, the middle room, whose key fits the door of Number 7 as well."

It annoyed her to see him still so calm.

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"I'm wondering what you're getting at," he said quietly.

" 'What I'm getting at?' That's a good one! You rob my husband. You fix things so that I'm accused of the theft. Now I've proved that you were the thief, you have the nerve to ask me what I'm getting at!" She burst out laughing. "Really it's a scream! And I wish you could see your face just now!"

"Still," he remarked thoughtfully, "you know quite well it wasn't I who stole that money."

"So you stick to it?"

"It follows that you've some definite motive for getting me arrested. Do you realize, I wonder, that the consequences of my arrest may be much more serious than you imagine? That it may bring infinite suffering to persons who haven't done you any harm? Do you know that, only this morning, something dreadful's happened?"

"Here?" She pretended to look round for traces of a catastrophe.

"Don't make a joke of it, please... I don't know in whose interests you're acting..."

" 'In whose interests?' " she giggled happily. "Really, you're priceless. You take my breath away! It beats the Fleischmann ramp at Budapest! I'd like to know why I should be acting in anyone else's interests when I'm simply clearing myself of a charge that's as beastly as it is absurd. Helping the police to catch the man who robbed my husband."

He looked her straight in the eyes.

“Yet it must have been you who stole that money,” he said in a low, pensive tone, as if he were trying to think things out. “Or, if it wasn’t you, it’s even worse.”

A motor hooted. He gave a slight start and looked round quickly. Kampf’s car was passing. The brewer was driving slowly. On his face was a truculent grin; he too was bubbling over with brutal exultation.

Monsieur Serge didn’t see Madame Meurice, who was hidden by the brewer’s bulky form. But his eyes met Eliane’s. She turned away at once. Her face was drawn and very pale.

“I don’t follow your last remark.”

“No matter.”

The car swung round the corner through the woods, going towards the chalet.

“What did you mean by saying ‘It’s even worse’?”

He hesitated; then, with a rush of uncontrolled emotion, said:

“You don’t realize what you’re doing. There are things you can’t possibly know... Unless it’s deliberate cruelty on your part.”

Almost she believed him, asked for explanations. Then she thought better of it, laughed again, took a sip of her cocktail.

“What a marvelous actor you are, Monsieur Fleischmann! Really you should try out your talents on the Superintendent—who, I see, is watching us.”

“Suppose I asked you... ?” He paused.

“What?”

He shrugged his shoulders, gazed vaguely at the char-à-bancs, which were beginning to move away.

“Nothing. I’ve nothing to ask you.”

He was regaining his self-command. He straightened his back. His face hardened. As he rose to his feet his eyes settled on the woman’s, coolly, searchingly.

“Are you legally married to Van der Laer?”

“If my husband was here, he’d knock you down for that remark... No, perhaps not. I expect he’d do as I do— laugh at you!”

But somehow her laugh rang false. And it was with a secret apprehension that she watched him slowly returning to the *Relais d'Alsace*.

When crossing to the *Grand*, he'd had the look of a whipped dog. He left her with the air of a man who has taken a new lease of strength.

That was apparent when he entered the restaurant, carrying his head high, walked straight to Labbé's table and, without a word of excuse, sat down facing the Superintendent.

"Madame Van der Laer has just told me about that business of the three doors."

"Has she now?" There was a look of mild curiosity in the police officer's childlike eyes.

"Yes. As a theory it's plausible enough. On the face of it, mind you. So I'll ask you to give me till tomorrow..."

"To prove it's false?"

"Yes. I hope to do so."

"And at the same time prove you're not the Commodore?"

"That may take a bit longer."

Anyone entering the restaurant would have taken them for two old acquaintances having a friendly chat. Labbé was slipping papers into a brief-case as he talked.

"Would it be indiscreet if I asked you for some information about this Madame Meurice to whom you referred over the 'phone this morning? I gather she lives at a chalet not far from here."

"Yes, the only house between La Schlucht and the Honeck. The Meurices rented it six years ago when their daughter showed signs of being consumptive. Robert Meurice—he was fairly well off at the time—had just launched a concern for the manufacture of cellulose varnish. At the end of the year he bought the chalet outright. His wife and daughter lived there most of the year; he came and stayed with them whenever he could manage it. He died of pneumonia two years later."

"Did you know them at the time?"

"No. I made Madame Meurice's acquaintance only a few months ago. I'm repeating what she told me. Her husband kept her in the dark about his business. His death landed her in all sorts of difficulties. An employee took over the running of the factory—it's somewhere near Chaumont. The

position was complicated by the fact that, shortly before his death, Monsieur Meurice had converted the business into a joint-stock company. Madame Meurice imagined she was well off. She'd never had to bother about money matters. She was induced to sell out her holding at the rock-bottom of a slump, when the shares had dropped to almost nothing. You're better placed than I am to find out the true facts. Personally I've a feeling that that fellow Kampf had a hand in pushing the shares down so as to buy them up on the quiet. Anyhow, he's reputed now to be the real owner of the factory.

"That's about all I can tell you. Madame Meurice never spoke to me about her money troubles, and though it sometimes struck me they were rather short, I never dreamt how bad things were. Not till today. You heard, of course... She had to sell the chalet this morning, and the buyer was—Kampf!"

The Superintendent's eyes were still fixed on the man sitting opposite him.

"... of whom you're jealous," he added smoothly. "And, if I've got it right, it's less the chalet than the lady that he's after."

Monsieur Serge kept silence.

"Just one more question. Assuming the lawyer accepted your offer, how did you propose to raise the purchase money within twenty-four hours? The day before yesterday you couldn't produce two thousand francs to settle your hotel bill. This morning you talked airily of tens of thousands."

"Afraid I can't tell you... I might have raised a loan."

"From whom? From the person you met on that mysterious trip to Munster? For you certainly did get money that night. You didn't sell your bracelet. You left the hotel with empty pockets and you came back with several thousand francs. You didn't go to a bank. You didn't sleep at a hotel. You profess to have spent the night walking to Munster and back—something of a feat for a man of your age. And that night a theft took place. You tell me you're not guilty of it, and I'm quite ready to believe you. Still, you must confess..."

He paused, then continued in a meditative tone:

"The international police believe the Commodore to have made some thirty millions by his various frauds. Let's say that, with the life he led, he got through half of it. Let's add another five millions given to his various

accomplices. There's still ten millions left, that can't have vanished into thin air!"

"And which would have spared the Commodore the necessity of slinking into that Dutchman's room like a hotel rat, to steal a few miserable thousands." There was hardly any irony in Monsieur Serge's voice.

"You've said it!"

The war of wits was going on so tranquilly that neither Madame Keller nor her husband paid the least attention. Gretel came up and asked:

"Shall I lay your places at the same table?"

Monsieur Serge left it to his companion to reply.

"Why not?" He added in a friendly tone: "I suppose you know who Madame Van der Laer is?"

"I've reasons to think she's a Hungarian."

"She's a dancer. More precisely a night-club artiste who four years ago married Samuel Natanson, a well-to-do American."

His eyes did not shift a hair's breadth ; they were fixed on Monsieur Serge's forehead.

"This man Natanson was fleeced at Budapest by the Commodore, who was then operating under the name of Fleischmann. Natanson divorced his wife a year later, and she became Van der Laer's mistress. After six months, Nouchi—that's her first name—got him to marry her."

"I'm trying to find the connection..." murmured Monsieur Serge.

"At Budapest, as I said, Natanson, Nouchi's first husband, was fleeced by the Commodore. Some years later, at La Schlucht, Van der Laer, her second husband, has money stolen from him."

"And you believe the Commodore is at La Schlucht?"

"Or, by a singular coincidence, someone remarkably like him. Shall we go to our table? I think lunch is ready."

"One thing's certain: there's a thief here," Monsieur Serge conceded as he spread his napkin. He did not cut the figure of an accused man. Quite the contrary. The police officer seemed to be treating him as a colleague, asking his opinion.

"Yes, that theory of yours about the way the thief got into Van der Laer's room looks conclusive at first sight. The problem is to spot the flaw in it."

“Do you think you’ll do so?” smiled Monsieur Labbé.

“Perhaps I’ve done so already.”

“Really? Would you tell me... ?”

“No. I’ll wait till I’m sure.”

The telephone bell purred. Nick answered the call effusively. When he came back he said to his wife in a loud tone:

“Two cream cakes, half a dozen plum tartlets, and six bottles of vintage Moselle, for the chalet. Gretel can take them on her bike. They’re in a hurry.”

“Did Madame Meurice give the order?”

He leered to his wife, shot a sly glance at Monsieur Serge.

“What do you think?... No, old Kampf it was. Over the ’phone he sounded mighty cock-a-hoop. Shouldn’t be surprised if they’re celebrating his engagement with a slap-up lunch.”

The two men at the table gazed at each other. Then Monsieur Serge lowered his eyes, not to hide the emotions they betrayed, but from a sort of compunction.

“Obviously,” Labbé remarked gruffly, “if the lawyer’d fallen in with your proposal, it’s you who’d be there now. Queer, isn’t it, how things pan out? And tonight you’d have gone to Munster to borrow the money from your friend.”

Outside, the vanguard of the week-end hikers could be seen trudging up the slope. Quaint costumes, hobnailed boots, the inevitable rucksacks.

Before entering, they studied the bill of fare posted on the terrace and consulted in undertones. Then they settled round one of the tables without a table-cloth, dumped their rucksacks on the floor, ordered beer, and unpacked their food, talking at the top of their voices in Alsatian *patois*.

Another group took their meal on the hillside facing the inn. The men wore abbreviated shorts, displaying sinewy legs.

With a basket strapped to her handle-bars, Gretel rode off in the direction of the chalet.

“Have some more potato salad,” suggested Monsieur Labbé; then went on at once, as if picking up the thread of his previous remarks: “Just too bad, isn’t it? The Commodore in love and obliged to climb down to a rival

be-cause he can't get at his millions. Now what, I wonder, could prevent his getting at them? The police? But the police began to take an interest in him only after Van der Laer had his money stolen."

The telephone bell rang again. This time Madame Keller went to answer it, borrowing a pencil from her husband on her way.

"And Madame Van der Laer knew the Commodore at Budapest."

The drift of the Superintendent's ruminations was still obscure, and Monsieur Serge, who was quite unruffled, seemed to be making genuine efforts to discover it.

"There's a telegram for you, Monsieur Labbé. All in numbers. The post-office has 'phoned it through. The postman will bring the written telegram tomorrow."

Madame Keller, who had copied the figures on a leaf torn from a scribbling-tablet, laid it on the table. Labbé wrote in the words under the rows of figures, enabling Monsieur Serge to read it.

Commodore reported at Venice by Italian police stop Have asked for details and will transmit them later.

A group of young men and women seated round a table covered with sausages, cold pies, and scraps of greasy paper launched into an Alsatian folksong. Beaming with delight, Nick went and fetched his flute and began playing an obbligato.

Nouchi had left the terrace of the *Grand Hotel*.

7. NEW DEVELOPMENTS

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IT was a little after three when Van der Laer, followed by his wife, left the restaurant and paused unhappily halfway across the terrace. Trippers, trippers everywhere! True, common hikers fought shy of the splendors of the *Grand Hotel*. But the crowd from the char-à-bancs had no such compunction.

Van der Laer watched the influx with a look of consternation and extreme distress. Just as he was about to sit down, Labbé came up to him.

“Isn’t this awful!” the Dutchman groaned.

Hitherto the place had been idyllically calm; now it reminded one of rush-hour on the Paris Boulevards— with a dash of local color added by the farmers’ vans converted for the nonce into char-à-bancs and packed with motley hordes of countryfolk; leather-helmeted motorcyclists accompanied by girls dressed like boy-scouts; would-be nudists in scanty bathing-kit, their proper garments slung from alpenstocks resting on their shoulders.

All were talking Alsatian *patois*. They gaped. They gorged. They played on loud, outlandish instruments. Two char-à-bancs followed in quick succession and disgorged two village bands in uniform, which promptly started playing in the middle of the road.

“Tomorrow night,” Labbé reassured him, “it’ll be quite calm again. It’s like this every week-end.”

“Jeff!” Van der Laer shouted. “Bring the car out. Anything to get away from this! We’ll come back tomorrow evening... That all right, Nouchi?”

“You do what you like. I’m staying.”

The contrast was amusing between the pink-and-white freshness of the young man’s face and the impression of unutterable boredom conveyed by his demeanor. He was conscious of being grotesquely out of place, with his beautifully cut pale-gray lounge suit, the latest thing in silk shirts, and buckskin shoes. Even the customers of the *Grand*—worthy tradesfolk from Nancy, Belfort, and Strasburg—were eyeing him as if he were a freak of nature.

“Sorry to bother you,” said the Superintendent, “but I’d like to ask you some more questions.”

“Waiter, bring me a whisky!” He turned to Labbé. “You’ll have one too, won’t you? But, for God’s sake, no more questions. I’m sick and tired of all the fuss that’s being made about a miserable sixty thousand francs. Look here! I withdraw my complaint—and that’s an end of it.”

“Sixty thousand-franc notes?”

“Yes. When the bank changed my florins they gave me only thousands, and I remember that the notes looked practically new... I’d have you know, Superintendent, that I’m here for a rest-cure. Doctor’s orders.”

His wife had found an empty chair. She had crossed her legs and was swinging her left leg petulantly.

“All right. I won’t worry you with questions. I’ll only ask you to let me have one last look at your bedroom.”

“How much water? Say when.”

He drank his glass off in one exasperated gulp.

“Very well. Come along.”

Nouchi preferred to stay on the terrace; she had a German novel in her hand. Actually she was more interested in a young Englishman who throughout lunch had blushed each time she looked in his direction.

“Well, here we are. What more do you want to see?” sighed the Dutchman. “There’s that damned attaché-case, and there’s the hole in the wall. I hear now that there’s some talk about the door-keys. I’m fed up with this hotel. Unfortunately my wife insists on staying. Everybody stares at me as if I was some sort of strange animal, because I’ve had my money stolen.”

A sickly smell of face-cream and eau-de-Cologne filled the air; the bed had not yet been made.

“When you started out at four the attaché-case was intact. When you returned at eight it had been broken open...”

“Look here! Didn’t I tell you I wasn’t lodging a complaint?”

Three times, with puckered brows, the police officer walked round the room. Valuables lay scattered about everywhere, including the contents of the luxurious dressing-case with the armorial bearings, which in themselves were worth a small fortune. At the end of each circuit he paused at the table on which the attaché-case was lying.

A plain deal table spread with a blue table-cloth.

Idly the Superintendent lifted the cloth. His eye lit on a handle, which he pulled towards him. Then he turned to the Dutchman.

“Did you know this table had a drawer?”

“No. When I’m at a hotel I always keep my things in my trunks. I don’t like drawers that heaven knows who has used before me.”

“Look!”

The drawer was full of crumpled thousand-franc notes. Labbé counted them. There were fifty-nine, not sixty.

“Well, I’m damned!” exclaimed the Dutchman. “So the money never left this room.”

“Steady on! You told me the notes were new. Look at these. All stained with grease or oil. And they wouldn’t be in that crumpled state if they’d never left this room. No, they were put there after the theft, yesterday or this morning.”

Van der Laer counted the notes again. Then, taking out twenty, he said rather awkwardly:

“I hope you’ll allow me to present this small sum to the police. Dispose of it as you think fit. Now that it’s all over...”

“Afraid I can’t take the money. But I’ll mention your offer to the head of my department, if you like.”

“By the way, it *is* all over, isn’t it?”

Labbé gave a non-committal answer. “Anyhow, I don’t suppose I’ll have to trouble you again.”

Every hundred yards along the path Monsieur Serge came on groups of campers pitching their tents, kindling fires, unpacking hampers of food. When he arrived in sight of the chalet, the brewer’s car was still standing in the drive. Going back a little way into the woods, he sat down. For an hour and a half he waited, without betraying the least impatience.

At five o’clock Kampf stepped forth, almost purple in the face but beaming with satisfaction. He didn’t get away at once, however. His starter was out of order and the gardener had to be fetched to crank the car.

The pale blue sky was cloudless; the garden a blaze of flowers. From the woods came sounds of merry voices, young folk calling to each other; sometimes a snatch of a song.

The car rumbled through the gateway. As the gardener was closing it Monsieur Serge approached and greeted him with a friendly wave of his hand.

“Madame Meurice is at home, isn’t she?”

In the past the gardener had always welcomed him with eager volubility; now he seemed tongue-tied.

The front door of the chalet was ajar. Monsieur Serge knocked. A voice, Madame Meurice’s, said: “Come in.”

Both were in the room when he entered. Madame Meurice was sitting in her favorite chair, a handkerchief rolled into a ball in her right hand, her eyes fixed on a dark corner. Eliane was standing, holding herself very straight; she seemed on the defensive. There was challenge in her eyes as she turned towards Monsieur Serge.

The large living-room occupied almost the whole of the ground floor, and the two women had their meals in it. The table hadn’t been cleared. On it still stood the tall slim bottles of Alsatian wine sent from the *Relais*, the remains of the tartlets, some fruit—and three black cigar-stumps on a saucer.

They were enough to show where Kampf had sat, bubbling over with vulgar joviality, fat and flabby, his cheeks flushed with wine and jubilation.

“Sure I’m not intruding?” Monsieur Serge lingered near the door, uncertain of his ground.

Madame Meurice persisted in looking away. Her bosom was heaving; he could see she had been weeping when he entered.

It was Eliane who spoke, and, like all who lack experience of saying disagreeable things, she overdid the harshness of her tone.

“Have you something to say to us?”

A little girl, not sixteen yet! And for months he’d been her trusted friend, her confidant. It was he who’d brought the music lying on the piano. The gramophone records, the novels on her bookshelf were gifts from him.

When she caught sight of him coming to the chalet, she’d run to meet him. Scold him if he let a day go by without a visit. “Mamma was *most* disappointed...”

All he now said to her was:

“Would you mind, Eliane, if I ask you to leave us— your mother and myself—for a few minutes?”

She hesitated, and glanced towards her mother, who without looking round said quietly:

“There’s no reason why Eliane shouldn’t stay.” Her voice sounded tired, a little hoarse; the voice of someone who has been sobbing.

No more, perhaps, than half a minute passed, but so poignant was the silence, broken only by the sound of breathing, that it seemed much longer. At last Monsieur Serge put his question—brutally direct, but he saw no help for it.

“Has the deed of sale been signed?”

No reply was needed. On the table, amongst the remains of lunch, lay a worn leather portfolio which obviously contained family papers, legal documents, and the like.

“I did what I believed to be my duty.” She looked towards him, no longer trying to conceal her reddened eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

At last his self-control gave way. He made no gestures, didn’t raise his voice. But the words came in a rush.

“So you’ve sold it to that man! So, all these weeks, you hadn’t enough trust in me to tell me frankly how things stood with you. You preferred to go to Kampf, a coarse-minded upstart, whose one idea was to exploit the situation...”

“Stop, please!”

“I’ve come too late. This morning when I rang up the lawyer—”

“You had no business to do so! Don’t you realize how compromising it was—for me? What ever must they have thought?”

She was trembling, her fingers plucking nervously at the handkerchief.

“And you shouldn’t have come to see us today,” she added.

Monsieur Serge was staring at the armchair in which Kampf had sat. And the sight of it seemed to intensify his anger and despair.

“Yes,” she went on, “I’ve sold the house. I’m free to act as I like, am I not? And it’s quite likely very soon I... I’ll...”

Her voice broke. Sobbing, she rose, ran to a door and closed it behind her. Evidently she stayed there, leaning against the door, waiting for her

tears to cease, for there was no sound of retreating footsteps.

The girl's big eyes were bitterly reproachful as she gazed at Monsieur Serge.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied with what you've done." She held herself stiffly erect, steeling herself to wound him with every word.

"He wants to marry her, doesn't he?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"Why not? What's it got to do with you?" She paused. Even in her anger she dimly realized she was going too far. Nevertheless she said it.

"Monsieur Kampf, anyhow, is an honest man."

She felt herself trembling from head to foot, seized by panic. How could she have said a thing like that? She watched him slowly raising his eyes towards her. And saw quite clearly that he was on the point of striking her—or, perhaps, only giving her a good shaking.

His breath was labored. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Then the mood passed. He fought down his resentment, the rage died from his face, and he was once again a well-mannered caller visiting friends.

With quite unlooked-for gentleness he murmured:

"You shouldn't have said that, Eliane... you of all people!"

She had nerved herself for a fight. But not on these lines. And when she saw a tear welling up between his lashes, she was quite disarmed.

"Sorry! But it's your fault too. You don't realize..."

She was pacing up and down the room, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor.

"Oh, it's all as beastly as it can be! That man! I simply can't bear him. It's more than just disliking; I loathe the sight of him. And to think that mamma... ! Do you know what he said this afternoon? A sort of hint he dropped. No, that's untrue. He doesn't drop hints. He just blurts things out in his horrid vulgar way, with that nasty, self-satisfied laugh of his. Oh, I know he pretended to be joking. But he wasn't. I was watching his eyes, and his fat lips..."

She swung round in a sudden rush of indignation, flung the words in Monsieur Serge's face.

“He wants one of us, mother or myself. Either will do. Oh, he didn’t put it quite like that. He was friendly. He was drinking his coffee, lolling in that big armchair. An ordinary chair isn’t enough for him, you know—even at lunch. He looked fatter than ever! He was saying his house ‘wasn’t like home’ without a woman in it. And then he said that mother and I were so much alike he didn’t know which to propose to. Then he added as if it were a sort of joke:

“ ‘Anyhow, as you’ll never leave each other, there’ll always be the two of you to brighten up my little home.’ ”

She gazed at the cigar-stumps the brewer had been chewing while he harangued the two women. Unable to keep still, she went on pacing up and down the room.

“I don’t know if mamma ever told you about it. But—”

“How long have you been... in difficulties?”

She laughed bitterly.

“We’ve never been out of them—that I can remember! When father died there were all sorts of muddles about the will. We’d thought we were well off, and there was barely enough to live on. Three months ago mamma started hunting round for another girl to come and stay here as a paying-guest. Some girl with chest-trouble like myself. Monsieur Kampf knew all about it. And he knew, too, that mamma won’t hear of our going to live at a lower altitude, on account of my lungs.”

Had her anger passed? No, even now, when she was pouring out her heart, the grievance that rankled worst of all came to the fore.

“And all the time you were drinking cocktails with that woman! Keeping appointments with her in the woods!”

He could hardly restrain a smile. “You poor little child!” he murmured almost to himself.

“I’m not a poor little child! I’m not unhappy! I...”

She couldn’t go on. Luckily Madame Meurice came back at that moment. She had washed her eyes, powdered her face. On her lips was the artificial smile she had conjured up as she opened the door.

She gazed at her daughter, then at Monsieur Serge. She seemed much calmer.

“You must excuse us,” she said. “We’re both in rather a nervous state today. I see no reason to conceal from you—I believe you know it already—that from now on we’re the tenants of Monsieur Kampf—who has been most considerate.”

Obviously rehearsed. What followed, too.

“So it’s too late to think of reconsidering this arrangement. It only remains for me to thank you for your kind intentions this morning, and for coming to see us now. We need rest, both of us. I’m afraid that for some time to come we shan’t be up to seeing visitors.”

Her manner was formal, bleakly polite. Eliane was pressing her face to the window, gazing at the valley.

Monsieur Serge was about to reply. His lips parted... No, what was the use? Already she was moving towards the door.

“Good-by,” she said, holding out a limp hand.

He looked round towards Eliane. She did not stir. Her back was turned.

What was the use? Nevertheless he said:

“*Au revoir.*”

He walked down the drive, his shoulders sagging, his eyes following the tracks of the brewer’s car. The gardener didn’t come forward to open the gate for him. The front door of the chalet had been closed. The two women were alone in the darkening room, with the empty bottles and the cigar-stumps... Stale cigar-smoke hung round the curtains and upholstery; next morning, staler and ranker still, it would recall to them the brewer’s presence.

In a clearing in the woods a family was picnicking, one of the children proudly perched on a forked branch...

When Monsieur Serge returned to the *Relais* night had fallen and dinner was almost over. He was so lost in thoughts that he didn’t cast his usual glance around the room on entering.

Two things, however, struck him. There was a tremendous din: bursts of loud conversation, singing, and the gramophone going full blast. Of course, he remembered, it’s Saturday.

The other thing was more surprising. For the first time for days he was greeted by a young, affectionate voice:

“Good evening, Monsieur Serge. I’ve laid your place at Monsieur Labbé’s table.”

Lena was looking her best. Clean apron, neatly curled ringlets, pink cheeks that still smelt faintly of lavender soap. Yes, it was actually Lena speaking to him as in the past, taking his coat and hat, even drawing up a chair for him.

And nobody seemed surprised. More unexpected still, Nick stopped winding the gramophone to shout across the room:

“Had a good walk, Monsieur Serge?”

Only Madame Keller kept a somewhat constrained look, perhaps because too brusque transitions didn’t suit her.

Monsieur Labbé was already at the chicken course. Like Nick, he inquired:

“Had a pleasant walk?” Then he looked more closely at his table-companion’s face. “What’s the trouble? I wonder if, in spite of what you told me, you’ve failed to solve the mystery of the three doors?”

Why was he laughing? Why that bantering tone?

“All right. I won’t keep you on tenterhooks. You don’t look in the mood for being teased. Van der Laer’s sixty thousand francs have been recovered. Or, to be exact, fifty-nine thousand of them.”

Monsieur Serge raised his eyes slowly to the speaker’s face.

“Then who... ?”

“Steady on! I didn’t say we’d caught the thief. But the notes have been found in the drawer of the table on which the attaché-case was placed. Which, obviously, gives you another opportunity for suspecting Madame Van der Laer.”

Labbé’s affability was not quite so spontaneous as it seemed. He was watching his companion’s face, noting his reactions.

“So,” he continued, “for the third time the problem takes a new form. The notes have been restored. Someone took them outside the bedroom, for they’re stained with oil. Then, for some reason or other, they were brought back. The person who did that can only have been someone who could move about the passages of the hotel without attracting attention... Don’t worry. I’ve had time to question the staff. You’ve not been seen across there once.”

“What wine shall I bring, Monsieur Serge?” asked Lena, who seemed bubbling over with gaiety.

“Don’t care!”

“You look as if you’d just been attending a funeral,” the Superintendent remarked.

Outside, Fredel was reeling off his usual patter for the benefit of some people who’d just arrived in a big yellow car.

“So you see,” said Labbé, “we’ll have to make a fresh start. I’m expecting an expert tomorrow from Headquarters to analyze the stains on the notes. That’ll give us something to go on.”

He leant back in his chair, lit a cigar.

“It comes to this. We’re up against a very simple or a very tricky case. Either a common theft—by a servant, for instance, who lost his nerve so badly that he put back the money. Or else there’s somebody with brains behind it. In which case the oil-stains are merely meant to put us off the scent. Only one person, so far, seems put out by the new turn of events—Madame Van der Laer. But that may be because women are always thrilled by being mixed up in police inquiries, and she doesn’t want the curtain to fall on this one too soon. Unless...”

He smiled.

“Really it’s fantastic, the number of theories one could build up round the *data* in the case.”

He rambled on in this vein for an hour or so. The room was getting noisier than ever. A tipsy young Alsatian started a solo dance; each of his capers was greeted with a burst of laughter.

At 10 p.m. Monsieur Serge went up to bed.

At 10:15 Labbé took off his shoes, dropped them with a bang, then put them on again. After that he stretched himself, fully dressed, on his bed.

At 11 Nick closed the doors and shutters of the *Relais*. At the *Grand Hotel* the lights went out in the restaurant.

At midnight there were faint rustlings in Monsieur Serge’s room, then sounds of shuffling along the wall.

Revolver in hand, the Superintendent slipped off the bed, crept to his window and peeped out. Looking up, he saw a shadowy form moving along the eaves.

8. WATCHES OF THE NIGHT

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THE Superintendent did not take the same path as Monsieur Serge. After slipping woolen socks over his shoes, he went down the stairs and out by the front door.

It was a starlight night. The *Grand Hotel* glimmered whitely across the road. To the left of the *Relais* the shop-sign of the fancy-goods shop was creaking in the night-wind.

Monsieur Serge was evidently on a definite errand, for his movements showed no hesitation. He crossed the road to the petrol-pump, walked round the corner of the hotel and entered the open yard round which were the lockups for private cars.

Just as he vanished round the corner, Labbé made another discovery. At least two people were lurking in a patch of darkness to the right of the hotel. They weren't talking, but so still was the night that the slight, unconscious movements of their bodies reached his ears. And gazing steadily in that direction, he made out lighter patches in the darkness—doubtless their hands and faces.

One of them stepped forward from the wall and started after Monsieur Serge.

Thus when, a moment later, the police officer made a move, there were three of them, one behind another; while the fourth remained behind in the patch of shadows.

What followed was singular enough. The first man, Monsieur Serge, halted in the center of the yard, where there was a well and, beside it, the small motor-pump which supplied the hotel with water. The motor was covered by a small, kennel-like shed.

Monsieur Serge was just about to put his hand inside the shed when he straightened up. He had become aware that someone else was in the yard, beside the wall, watching his movements.

The Superintendent was so much behind the second man that he made no further attempt to conceal himself but walked straight forward, revolver in hand, saying just loud enough for both men to hear:

“Don’t move, either of you!”

Twenty people were in the bedrooms overlooking the yard, but nobody awoke. It had all happened in a few seconds, like a well-directed incident in a film.

The first move made by the police officer was to inspect the man who had backed against the wall. It was Fredel, the hotel porter. He looked scared out of his wits.

“Walk towards the well,” Labbé whispered.

For a moment he thought of going back to fetch the person, whoever it was, who’d been with Fredel. Instead, he asked him:

“Who was with you?”

“Where?”

“Don’t play the fool. Who was with you iust now on the road?”

“Gretel.”

“Go and fetch her.”

Monsieur Serge was still the calmest of the three. It was too dark to make out his expression, but his tall form could be seen in profile. His arms were folded. As the Superintendent came up he asked:

“That was the porter, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Please tell me what you’re doing here.”

Instinctively the two men spoke in undertones so as not to attract the attention of people in the hotel.

Without waiting for a reply, Labbé bent over the well, but nothing could be seen in the blackness. He turned to the shed housing the motor.

“Have you a torch?”

“Sorry. I came out without one.” For the first time Monsieur Serge’s tone was definitely ironical. “But I’ve matches,” he added, producing a box.

Two dim forms approached, hesitantly. Before dealing with the newcomers the Superintendent struck a match and peered inside the shed. The porter whispered apprehensively:

“Take care! There’s petrol. Use my torch.”

The tiny beam played over cylinders, a belt, a flywheel.

Something became audible in the still night air, a sort of intermittent throbbing, which puzzled them at first. Then, when they looked towards

Gretel, they saw her shoulders heave. She was sobbing her heart out in the darkness a few yards away. Her tousled hair made her head seem three times its real size.

A slender young body. Slim shoulders. And a monstrous caricature of a head!

“Under the flywheel.” Monsieur Serge, like the kneeling Superintendent, was getting impatient.

At last the beam of the torch fell on something white. Labbé slipped his hand under the flanged rim. When he withdrew it he was holding a wad of notes, which the porter eyed with utter stupefaction.

No one spoke. The lamp had been switched off. The Superintendent scrambled to his feet.

He didn’t want to rouse Nick and adjourn to the *Relais*. Nor did he feel like asking his three companions into his bedroom.

“Follow me,” he said.

To the right of the hotel, just before the turning, there was a sort of esplanade with a stone parapet. Char-à-bancs and hikers always stopped at this point to admire the view.

Labbé took his stand against the parapet. He had to call Gretel three times before she’d come to him. She was sniffing, trying to keep back her tears.

“What were you up to out of doors at such an hour?”

She burst out crying again, so noisily that Labbé looked up anxiously at the hotel windows.

“I... I had to meet Fredel.”

“Yes? Are you his mistress?”

It was too dark to make out their faces. But the white blurs of their hands were eloquent.

“We’re going to get married.”

She didn’t dare to look in Monsieur Serge’s direction, and kept her back to him.

“Answer my question. Are you his mistress?”

She nodded. The porter put in a word.

“We had to meet like that. Didn’t want to set tongues wagging.”

Young though he was, not more than thirty, he was already running to fat. Gretel looked a mere slip of a child beside him.

“How long has this been going on?”

“For... for a year,” she sobbed.

A year! And she was only sixteen! Fredel looked away uncomfortably. The Superintendent asked him:

“When were you going to marry her?”

“When we’d enough money to set up for ourselves.”

“What’s the idea? A shop?”

“No,” he said, not without pride. “A hotel.”

“Why did you follow Monsieur Serge?”

“I saw him go by. I wondered what he was up to.”

“Right. Go to bed.”

“But...” He pointed awkwardly to the girl.

“Don’t bother yourself about her.”

“If you tell Nick or Madame Keller, they’ll sack her.”

“Go to bed.”

“I swear I’ve not done anything...”

“That’s enough of it. Clear out!”

Monsieur Serge was standing at a little distance. He had the air of a man who chances to be present at a family quarrel and affects not to notice.

“You, too, Gretel—trot off to bed,” said Labbé as the porter opened the service door of the *Grand*.

She hesitated. At last she moved away, still weeping. The Superintendent proceeded to count the notes in his hand.

“Fifty-one, two, three... sixty.”

He fixed his eyes on Monsieur Serge’s as far as the darkness permitted. Now they were alone they could talk as man to man—almost, it seemed, as equal to equal.

“Well?”

Monsieur Serge lit a cigarette. The flame lit up a face that was quite composed, even more so than it had been during the last few days. Its expression was one of bland indifference.

“Well—what? Haven’t you tumbled to it?... How about walking a bit?”

They strolled up the road, on their left the mountainside, the valley on their right.

“The explanation’s simple—so simple you probably won’t believe it! First, I was accused of theft. Then I ceased being suspected—for the benefit, if one may put it so, of Nouchi Van der Laer. Next, there was that business of the three doors. I fell under suspicion again. This afternoon I fancied I’d lit on the truth, and hoped to clear myself completely. For certain private reasons I hadn’t time to take immediate steps. For similar reasons I particularly wanted to be left in peace—at last.”

“Madame Meurice?”

“That’s as it may be. What matters is that I intended to be free to go where I liked, from tomorrow morning on, and to do that I had to clear myself completely.

“The method I adopted may strike you as a trifle drastic. It would cost sixty thousand francs—but it was worth that to me. Before going in to dinner—you’ll remember it was dark when I got back—I slipped across the road and put the notes in a place where they were bound to be discovered first thing in the morning. The hotel mechanic always starts the motor going at five.”

His cigarette had gone out. Composedly he relit it.

“At dinner you told me the money’d been recovered. A facer, you’ll admit! Imagine my position next morning when another lot of sixty thousand francs turned up! I’d fall under suspicion again. So I went across just now to take back the money I’d ‘planted.’ And that’s all there is to it.”

He snapped his fingers—to convey his indifference, or disdain for the vagaries of chance.

“We have still to ascertain,” said Labbé meaningly, “if the stolen notes were those found in the drawer, or those beneath the flywheel.”

“Very likely the bank that changed Van der Laer’s money noted the numbers.”

“And we’ve still to ascertain something even more important—where you got this money. Don’t forget that some days ago you couldn’t even pay your hotel bill. You pretended to go to Munster to raise money. Unless I’m much mistaken, you went no farther than the chalet. And what little I know

of Madame Meurice's circumstances makes it unlikely she was in a position to lend or to give you so large a sum."

Monsieur Serge said nothing. He had the look of a man out for an after-dinner walk, who is relishing the beauty of a calm starry night.

The Superintendent, however, would not drop the subject.

"One sum only, of sixty thousand francs, was stolen. And this sum has been restored twice within the space of a few hours."

"Singular, I grant you."

"I won't ask what took place at Madame Meurice's this afternoon..."

"Oh, there's no mystery. I was treated like an old friend who's suddenly suspected of being a thief." The bitterness in his voice was tempered by the lightness of his tone. "Have you any more questions to ask me, Monsieur Labbé?" he added.

The two men gazed at each other across a yard of darkness.

"We'll have another talk about it tomorrow."

They walked back in silence. At the hotel door there was an exchange of courtesies.

"After you, Superintendent."

"No, after you."

Both men held their breath as they walked up the stairs...

No sooner had Monsieur Serge entered his bedroom than he stopped dead, a startled look on his face. He glanced round the room, closed the door hastily, and went straight to the bed.

"Hush!" he whispered. There was someone lying on the bed. A low, incessant sound of sobbing. "Hush—for heaven's sake!"

He gazed at Gretel's prostrate form; on his face anger and dismay struggled with compassion.

The door between Labbé's room and his was bolted only. Monsieur Serge hung his coat over the handle to mask the keyhole.

"What does this mean?" he asked severely.

She burst into tears again. He put his hand over her lips.

"Not a sound."

He lit the lamp. Things would look still worse if anyone came in and found them in the dark. Unthinkingly he began fondling her hair, as one

strokes the hair of a fretful child to soothe it, murmuring: “Hush now, *please*. My dear little Gretel, do stop crying!”

The effect of the words was quite unexpected. She flung herself into his arms, nestling to his breast. As she dried her eyes she sighed:

“Oh, Monsieur Serge, I’m so unhappy!”

“Ssh! The Superintendent’s in the next room. What on earth possessed you to come here?”

She was too overcome by emotion to reply at once. He went on stroking her hair and forehead, trying to calm her. He was horribly embarrassed by the situation. Her cheeks were moist, fever-hot.

“Monsieur Serge, please, please save me! You don’t know... I swear I don’t love him. Honor bright!”

Sometimes his eyes settled on the girl, whose sobs were dying down; sometimes strayed to the door between the two rooms.

“I don’t know how it happened. He came across every day for a glass of wine. He talked to me. He said silly things that made me laugh. On New Year’s Eve he danced all the time with me, and kissed me. And then...”

“I know, my dear, I know.”

“No, you can’t know. He started talking to me about a hotel we could start together on the Honeck—opposite the one that’s there now, which never has room enough. A swell hotel with bathrooms and waiters in dress-clothes. One day he asked me over to his room to look at the plans he’d drawn. He really had drawn them—in different colors. The front of the hotel, a terrace with trees. I said it would need an awful lot of money. He showed me a wad of banknotes, more than thirty thousand francs, hidden under his mattress.

“ ‘Just now,’ he said, ‘everyone treats me like dirt. But one day they’ll bow low to me. And to you too, if you choose.’

“I was frightened, I don’t know why. He took me in his arms.”

Again her eyes grew misted.

“It’s horrible, what he did. He swore it had to be done; that was the only way of making certain I’d be his wife. After that he always got me to meet him on the road. In the summer there’s so many servants at the *Grand* it wasn’t safe going to his bedroom. When I missed a meeting with him he used to beat me. And he often told me that, if I let him down, he’d kill me.”

She was trying to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand; the little forlorn face was lined with glistening streaks.

“And he’s a thief. I don’t mind telling *you*. He confessed it to me. He even bragged about it. One of his tricks is to pinch some liters of petrol from the cars that come to the hotel. The other day he found a lady’s handbag on the terrace. It had a thousand francs in it, and a little watch set with diamonds. He wanted me to keep the watch. And, when they were looking for the bag, he pretended to be hunting for it like the others.”

“It was he who stole Van der Laer’s money, wasn’t it?”

She nodded.

“That’s not all. He can’t bear you, in fact he hates you. He’s told me so. But that doesn’t prevent him shaking hands with you, and taking drinks from you, and playing cards with you. And guess why he hates you! Because he’s jealous!”

She was blushing. Still, there was a glint of satisfaction in the tear-dimmed eyes; at last she’d come out with it!

“He says that women fall in love with you because you’ve good manners and talk to them nicely. Well, I know that Lena’s kept a handkerchief of yours that you dropped in the restaurant, and she often does your room even when it’s not her turn.”

Again Monsieur Serge cast a worried look at the communicating door.

“Of course he’s right in a way. You’re quite different from the sort of folk we get here.” She had averted her eyes. More than ever she looked like a little fluffy-haired china doll. One of her curls was falling across her face. “It was he who first mentioned your name when that Dutchman’s money was stolen. He didn’t say anything definite; just dropped hints. I told him it was a dirty trick. He laughed. He said he knew you’d turned my head, like you’d turned my sister’s and the two ladies’ at the chalet. It was then he told me he’d taken the money.

“ ‘It means we’ll have our hotel before the year is out,’ he said. ‘One more stroke of luck like that and we’ll get married, whether you like it or not. As for your friend Serge, I shouldn’t be surprised if he goes to jail.’”

“That made me wild. He roared with laughter. I tell you, you don’t know the sort of man he is. Everyone thinks he’s a nice, good-natured sort of fellow. Not he! Do you know what he does when one of the customers

doesn't give him a big enough tip? He sticks a nail in his tire. One young chap was nearly killed that way on the steep bit going down to Gérardmer.

"When the police came, I never thought they'd dare to suspect *you*." Her manner showed that this had been something of a blow. "But there! It's their job to suspect everybody, I suppose," she added hastily. "I was in a dreadful state! I didn't dare to tell the truth. Fredel might have killed me.

"I saw how sad you were. And you ate hardly anything. So I swore to him that if he didn't put back the money I'd tell the police. He wouldn't believe me at first. Then I fairly lost my head! I shouted at him. That was last night. He was scared somebody might overhear.

" 'You're a silly little fool,' he said. 'I never heard such nonsense!' But he put it back."

She stopped abruptly. Now that she had told everything she seemed aghast at what she'd done. And only now she realized that she was sitting at Monsieur Serge's side, on the bed. She jumped up, blushing.

He was as embarrassed as she. To divert her attention he pointed again to the door leading into the Superintendent's room and whispered, "Ssh!"

"I'll have to be getting back to my room," she said. There was a hint of disappointment in her voice. Had she expected another end to this encounter? Or had she something more to say?

When she was at the door she hesitated } then came back to him.

"Listen! It would be wiser if you went away. Fredel may have been lying, maybe not. He told me that if one day he let out what he knew, you'd be arrested at once. I don't know what he's got hold of. A letter, I expect, as he always goes to meet the postman and looks into his bag. The postman's his cousin, you know."

Her face had grown paler. Suddenly she asked with shy abruptness:

"Monsieur Serge, couldn't I be of use to you? I could keep house for you, couldn't I? I don't want to marry Fredel. I can't bear to think of it."

Another fit of sobbing. She seemed on the point of flinging herself into his arms again. Before she could do so, he took her by the shoulders, made her lie down on the bed, and whispered:

"Now, Gretel, my dear, be a good little girl. Keep quite quiet. Not a sound!"

A perplexed look on his face, he started pacing up and down the room on tiptoe, pausing each time he passed the bed to fondle her hair.

At last she dozed off. Utterly worn out, he sank into the only chair in the room. Vaguely he watched the sleeping girl; saw her cheeks grow pink, then glowing red, veiled by a soft golden down.

9. THE FUGITIVES

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GRAY dawn. A leaden sky. Wisps of pale mist trailing up the valley.

Leaning on his crutch, Nick opened the shutters. The stove on which he warmed the coffee every morning was already lit.

And, as he also did every morning, he walked round to the back of the hotel and inspected the wooden outbuilding in which the two girls slept.

“Gretel! Lena!” he shouted.

He pressed his face to the shut windows, trying to see between the curtains.

“Not up yet, lazybones? Won’t you never learn... ?”

He spoke gruffly, but his eyes twinkled. Every morning he went there in the hope of forcing the girls to open the door and let him have a look at them before they’d finished dressing.

“Coming!” said Lena.

“Sure you’re not in bed still?”

“No. I’m dressed.”

“Dressed, are you? Well, open the door and show yourself.”

“Just a moment!”

“Open it at once!”

“Please wait just a second. I’m... Right!”

She flung the window open. She was in her combinations, just putting on her garters. On the washstand lay a dirty brush beside a basin of soapy water.

“Your sister’s not up yet, I’ll bet.”

Nick moved to the next window, thumped it.

“Hi there, Gretel!”

Not a sound.

“What’s the game? Spending the morning in bed? Want me to come in and haul you out?”

After looking through the window he went to the door and rattled it. To his surprise, it wasn’t bolted.

“Well, I’m damned! Sleeping out, is she? Hi, Lena, come and have a look!”

The room was empty. The bed hadn’t been slept in.

“Wonder where she spent the night, the little slut!”

Muttering imprecations, he went back to the restaurant and bawled up the stairs: “Come down, Gretel! Come down this minute!”

Alarmed though she was, Lena was going about her work, getting the early breakfasts ready.

“I’ll bet she’s in Monsieur Serge’s room,” growled the hotel-keeper. “But he won’t get away with it. A child of sixteen! Disgusting, I call it.”

He stumped upstairs, his crutch tapping the wooden steps, called her name again, then banged on Monsieur Serge’s door.

His wife popped out of another room, half-dressed.

“What are you making all that noise about?”

“What about? Gretel didn’t sleep in her bed last night. I’m pretty sure she’s with that...”

Another surprise was in store for him. Unthinkingly he had turned the handle of the door and, like Gretel’s, it opened at once.

There was no one in the room. The bed had not been slept in. But there was a hollow in the quilt, showing that someone had lain on it.

“Well, that beats everything! Monsieur Serge has hopped it too!”

Labbé emerged from his room in his pajamas, his hair tousled.

“What’s that?”

“Monsieur Serge has hopped it. And Gretel’s gone with him. My fault. I ought to have kept an eye on ’em. I’d noticed there was something in the wind. But a man of his age... !”

The Superintendent walked into the room and at once opened the wardrobe.

“Yes. He’s cleared out. His cape and hat are gone.”

“So they have.”

“And—yes, you’re right.” He had picked up a hairpin from the carpet. “Gretel must have spent some hours here last night. There’s a yellow hair on the bed. What are the nearest railway-stations?”

“Munster in one direction, Gérardmer in the other.”

“What trains?”

“None from Gérardmer before six. But there’s an early train from Munster at 4:30.”

Monsieur Labbé hastily slipped an overcoat over his pajamas and ran downstairs to the telephone. As he was picking up the receiver, Lena, who was near him, remarked:

“It’s too early to ’phone. Our line isn’t open before eight.”

“What about the *Grand*?”

“The same thing. The telephone doesn’t work at night in these parts.”

It was six o’clock. The lights were on in the kitchens of the *Grand*. A thin drizzle had set in, the road was shining.

Never had Lena been so ferociously hustled as she was that morning. It was on her that Nick took his revenge. As he hobbled up and down the restaurant he never stopped scolding and cursing her; when she started crying he launched out at her with his crutch.

“Your sister’s no better than a——, for all her innocent airs. And you take after her. But I’ll learn you, you little slut!”

The tables were still littered with dirty glasses, sawdust lay on the floor, the light was gray.

Upstairs Labbé was searching Monsieur Serge’s room. He could hear Madame Keller dressing in hers. His search was quite unfruitful. Nothing of interest in the suitcase which had been left. Two suits, well cut but rather worn. A dozen pairs of socks and golf-stockings. Three pairs of shoes, one studded with nails. An English trench-coat.

None of those personal knick-knacks which tell one something of their owner’s tastes. No letters. A few books only: two German novels, one of Claudel’s works in French, a complete set of Conrad in English.

At least thirty cigarette-ends on the floor—showing that Monsieur Serge had ruminated for some time before coming to a decision.

When the police officer came downstairs, Lena's eyes were red, Nick was eating in sullen silence.

At last, at eight, Labbé got his telephone call through. It was raining harder than ever. The line was working badly, as a branch had fallen on the wire somewhere in the forest.

The Gérardmer police were asked to make inquiries at the station and all the garages in the town. Similar instructions were given to Munster and Colmar.

Finally the Superintendent rang up Strasburg, Belfort, Nancy, and Paris. When he left the hotel he saw the porter, in a long hooded cape, fixing up something on the petrol-pump. He called him across. Fredel came with a sulky look on his face.

“Do you know that Gretel ran away last night, with Monsieur Serge?”

The porter didn't believe it. Suspecting a trap, he watched the police officer from the corner of an eye without replying.

“Gretel spent part of the night in his room.”

“Is that true, Lena?”

When she nodded, an anxious look came to his face. He swore under his breath, then muttered: “Dirty work!”

That was all... Lena kept on bursting into tears. But Madame Keller gave her no peace.

“Don't dawdle! As if it wasn't bad enough, the way your sister's let us down!”

At ten a reply came in from Gérardmer. Nobody answering to the description of either of the wanted couple had been seen at the station.

The report from Munster came in later. It was extremely vague. Two first-class tickets for Strasburg had been issued in the early hours, but the booking-office clerk hadn't seen the faces of the travelers, as the light was bad and, moreover, his window was in frosted glass.

No news from Strasburg, Nancy, or Belfort.

Finally Labbé sent a long telegram to Headquarters in Paris, asking for more information about the “Commodore” reported at Venice.

All that morning the Van der Laers stayed indoors. The road remained empty, bordered by two torrents of water that swelled as the rain grew heavier. Even the char-à-bancs going through halted only for a moment, and nobody got out.

Thunder was growling in the mountains. By eleven it had got so dark that lamps were lit in the *Relais*. On the other side of the road, too, the dining-room was lit up, and the waitresses could be seen laying the tables for lunch.

Nick couldn't keep still. Fussing and fuming, in a vile temper, he prowled about the hotel. He seemed to regard Gretel's escapade as a personal affront.

"When I think that she was in his room last night, blast her...!"

His behavior got on Madame Keller's nerves, and it was owing to this that Labbé learned the origin of Nick's lameness.

"You'd never believe how jealous that man is!" she confessed to the Superintendent. "He has an idea that all the girls who come here are his private property. Cock o' the roost, that's what he'd like to be. Oh, I've got used to it... And he never stirs a finger to help me, not he! He just hangs round the servants and any young women amongst the customers. Only last month he got a fine black eye for ogling a girl who'd come here with her young man."

Nick, who had overheard, merely shrugged his shoulders, grinning oafishly.

"Oh, he fancies himself as a lady-killer! He started his little games after we'd only been married a few weeks, so I've had time to get used to it. Isn't that so, Nick? Still, it doesn't prevent him being jealous as the devil. The winter before last some young fellows came here for the winter sports, and one of them made up to me a bit. One evening when he was tight Nick took it into his head that the young man was in my room. He drinks like a fish, you know. You've only got to look at his eyes. Well, at one in the morning he started banging on my bedroom door. He woke up everybody in the hotel. Then he began shouting that there was a man in my room, and that he'd brought his gun to shoot the pair of us. I wouldn't open the door. He hammered on it with the butt of his shotgun. The guests were too scared to leave their rooms. Nice thing to happen in a well-conducted hotel, isn't it? Suddenly the gun went off and he got the pellets in his leg."

Nick had been shooting meaning glances at the Superintendent, as if to convey: "Don't pay any attention to her. You know what women are!" Aloud he said:

"How about a glass of quetsch, Monsieur Labbé? On the house."

"For Monsieur Labbé with pleasure, if he'd like one. But no drinks for you, Nick. You're quite worked up enough already." She gave an angry laugh. "Oh, yes, I know all about it! You're sick to death because Gretel's run away with Monsieur Serge. You were always after her yourself, and it's a smack in the eye for you."

The air in the restaurant was muggy, the windows misted over. Only the geraniums gave a touch of brightness to the room.

Towards noon the porter from the *Grand* came in, shaking the water off his cape. Perhaps he hoped for a talk with the Superintendent. He looked paler than usual, ill at ease. He drank two glasses of spirits in quick succession.

At three came a call from Paris.

"The Italian police report that the Commodore is still at Venice, at the *Tivoli Palace Hotel*. He registered under the name of Boris Morotzoff. His identity papers are in order, and as there's no charge against him, no arrest can be made."

Borrowing a waterproof from Nick, Labbé started out on foot. It was heavy going to the chalet. The path was slippery, and at certain points six inches deep in water.

He knocked at the door.

"Come in."

A cozy, comfortable atmosphere. The leaping flames of a log fire redeemed the bleakness of the light that came in through the windows. Seated at her fireside, Madame Meurice was putting the finishing touches to a blue blouse she had made for her daughter.

The girl was sitting on a low stool, poring over an English reader, repeating the sentences in a low voice.

The Superintendent was uncomfortably aware of his dripping waterproof and muddy shoes.

"I hope you'll excuse me, madame. I'm extremely sorry to burst in on you like this. I'm a police officer from the *Sûreté Générale* of Paris."

Listlessly she pointed to an empty chair.

“Monsieur Serge, whom you know, disappeared last night, and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you some questions about him.”

She smiled sadly. “Ask away!”

Eliane’s eyes were fever-bright. She gazed at him intently.

“May I begin by asking how you came to know him?”

The pine-logs crackled in the fireplace. As at the *Relais*, the window-panes were misted over. Now and then a great gust swept the forest and the roar of the wind drowned all other sounds.

“It’s quite simple,” she said. “We lead a very lonely life here. Like her father, my daughter has weak lungs and we came here for her health.”

“I’m much better, mamma. The doctor said that except for one weak spot at the top of my right lung...”

“Yes, she’s getting better, I’m happy to say... When I was told she needed mountain air, I didn’t want to separate from her and put her in a sanatorium. That’s why we’re here. One day about five months ago a stranger called, a Monsieur Serge Morrow. He was extremely apologetic, his manners were perfect. He told me that he’d spent his boyhood in this chalet, and asked my leave to come in for a few minutes. It’s true, what he said—he knew the house, I found, even better than I did. I noticed that he was particularly thrilled when he caught sight of that old clock over there, between the windows. An old friend of his youth.”

“You’d never met him before?”

“Never. I spoke to him about my daughter. I mentioned that her lungs were weak. We got into conversation, and I soon found that he too was one of those unhappy people who’ve been up against trouble of that kind. There’s a sort of special jargon one gets into—I wonder if you know what I mean? For instance, I remember his asking me if she had cavities or moist *râles*. He confessed to me that when he lived here as a boy he’d been in much the same state as Eliane. His widowed mother nursed him. I saw how robust he now is. And it gave me hopes for my daughter.

“It was I who asked him to come and visit us again. We got used to him, he called nearly every day. He brought books and gramophone records. He even started giving Eliane English lessons.”

She fell silent.

“Is that all you know about him?” Labbé asked.

She blushed.

“Like everybody else, I’ve heard the stories that have been going round. At first I wouldn’t believe them. And then... Well, all sorts of little details came back. Exactly the things that made him so attractive. He knows everything. He’s been everywhere. He speaks so many languages. I’ve a few mining shares. One day when I mentioned them he advised me to sell out at once. A week later they’d fallen by half their value.

“Yet he wasn’t rich. His clothes were almost threadbare.

At first we used to make jokes about that quaint green cape of his, that made him look like a monk.

“He was most tactful. Here’s an illustration. We often asked him to stay to lunch, but he always declined. He must have guessed that it was all we could do to make both ends meet, and what a strain on our resources it was, living here.”

Labbé turned to Eliane with some embarrassment and said awkwardly:

“Will you forgive me if I ask if he... if there was any sentimental attachment on his part?”

The girl blushed, but met his gaze without flinching.

“Perhaps, as time went on, he began to be a shade more affectionate. But he always behaved perfectly, he never said or did the least thing... Oh, I can’t even now believe that he’s a... what they make out. What did you mean by saying he’d ‘made off’?”

“He left the hotel last night, and a young chambermaid went with him.”

Madame Meurice bent her head over her sewing. Eliane, however, kept her eyes on the police officer.

A silence followed, so uncomfortable that the Superintendent felt impelled to break it.

“I prefer to be frank with you, and I must tell you that this man, whatever he may be, is no common thief. Even if he’d stayed, I doubt if I’d have seen my way to making an arrest. To tell the truth, either this man is one of the most remarkable criminals alive today—who goes by the name of the ‘Commodore’—or he’s a victim of circumstances.”

“You really think... ?”

“I’ve had two telegrams assuring me the Commodore’s in Venice. Otherwise I’d swear...”

“Who is this man you call the Commodore?”

“Somebody quite out of the ordinary run—a master-criminal, as they say. A man whose appetites are vast and who prefers to satisfy them by lawless methods and, I may as well admit it, holds his own against the police of every nation. A crook, to put it bluntly. But a crook against whom even his victims daren’t say a word. A man who juggles with millions and lives like a lord in every capital of Europe. All over the world the police have his description—but it’s impossible to arrest him.”

“I don’t follow.”

Outside, the pine-trees shivered in the gale. Summer was over and the season was beginning when one appreciates the cozy charm of a fireside. Labbé made no effort to resist the companionable atmosphere of the room.

“Our laws are far from perfect. Like a net some of whose meshes are too wide. There are some remarkably gifted men who’d have made good in any walk of life, but by the force of circumstances—or because they’re built that way—have taken to crime on the grand scale. We arrest thieves, poachers, ordinary murderers. But these master-criminals almost always slip through our nets.

“When the Commodore steals three or four million francs in Nice we can’t touch him because he’s a respectable American citizen called Morton, the whole American colony vouches for him, and his identity papers are in order. Even his victim refuses to lodge a complaint—more than that, stands up for his good friend Morton.

“We know of three, at most four, men of that caliber. First-class brains. Born leaders of finance or industry, who turned to crime. All we can do is to stay put. Biding our time till one of them makes a slip.

“I’m informed the Commodore’s at Venice. Well, I’ll swear the Commodore was here last night, under the name of Serge Morrow.”

“But,” Madame Meurice put in, “he couldn’t even pay his hotel bill.” She blushed slightly as she spoke.

“I know.”

“And would people of the kind you’ve been describing steal sixty thousand francs from a hotel bedroom?”

The police officer felt the girl's hostile eyes intent on him.

"I'm sincerely convinced Serge Morrow didn't steal that money. All the same, he tried to restore it. Which perhaps goes still further to prove that, appearances notwithstanding, he's the Commodore."

"But you said the Commodore's at Venice."

"What of that? Do you think he's less intelligent than the Italian police?"

Eliane put in a last scornful remark:

"Is it a habit of the Commodore's, running away with chambermaids?"

"If he did so, he had some good reason," Monsieur Labbé said gravely, adding as he rose to go: "You must excuse me, madame, for this intrusion. It was a most distasteful duty, I assure you."

But he had an inkling that both mother and daughter were sorry to see him leave so soon; they'd have preferred to go on talking about Monsieur Serge.

"Now that he's gone away..." Madame Meurice began, trying vainly to make her tone sound casual.

"With Gretel!" Eliane laughed bitterly. Then hastily dropped her eyes.

Labbé bowed, without waiting for his hostess to complete her remark. He put on his waterproof, which was still dripping with rain.

"Once again, all my apologies for this visit."

The door stood open. Rain was pattering on the steps, the flowers in the garden were drenched.

"I'm afraid you may have another call from me..."

"That will give us much pleasure," said Madame Meurice. It wasn't a mere polite phrase. She had colored up as she spoke. "Unlike Monsieur Serge," she added, "who, whether he's the Commodore or not, will never come again."

A significant little detail. The last words had been spoken impulsively, in a tone of vague regret. And Eliane cast her mother a reproachful look, behind which lay jealousy—a woman's of her rival.

The path was so slippery that Labbé had to cling to the branches of the trees along it to keep himself from falling. When near the hotel, he saw Fredel prowling round the petrol-pump, the hood of his cape drawn low over his forehead.

10. THE LEAD CASKET

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LIKE ripples on the surface of a pool into which a pebble has been dropped, the excitement at La Schlucht soon died down. Perhaps the weather helped. A spell of heavy, incessant rain had set in; the village seemed cut off by walls of water from the outside world.

Still nursing his grievance, Nick had not even the resource of airing it to visitors, for none came. For hours on end he kept the gramophone going full blast and vented his ill-humor on Lena, whom he seemed to hold responsible for her sister's escapade.

Madame Keller, whose energetic temperament had soon recovered from the shock, took the opportunity of giving the hotel a thorough cleaning-out. It was a case of "water everywhere," indoors as well as out of doors. At every turn one stumbled over buckets, splashed through puddles of soap-suds, and the air reeked of brass-polish.

At the *Grand*, Fredel informed them, the guests had settled down to playing backgammon and draughts, or dozing over back numbers of *l'Illustration*.

To everybody's surprise, Labbé was staying on. Apparently he did not regard the case as closed. Next day he borrowed again the hotel-keeper's mackintosh, went to the chalet and had a short talk with Madame Meurice.

It ended with a gesture from the latter, which seemed to signify: "I've no objection."

Thereafter for several hours he prowled round the garden, foraged in the outhouses and even in the fringes of the adjoining woods. Now and again Eliane joined him in his searches.

"It's you, mademoiselle, who can give me most help. When Monsieur Serge lived here he was a small boy. I don't imagine the buildings can have changed much. And he played in this garden, as I expect you've done. When, after many years, he came back to these parts and wanted to hide something—let's say, money—he'd naturally think of some hiding-place he'd used as a boy.

“Tell me. Three or four years ago, when you were a little girl, what was your favorite place—for playing by yourself, I mean?”

She thought it over.

“The stable, where the goats are now.”

“Did you ever try to hide anything?”

“No. I used to lie down there or play with the goats.”

But he drew blank in the stable, though he went over every inch of it.

“You didn’t play in the coach-house?”

“No, but one of my cousins, a boy, who stayed with us for a bit, used to spend all his time there.”

Labbé kept at it doggedly, indefatigably. By four o’clock his clothes were sopping, his shoes water-logged. He had explored every nook and cranny without success. But he was serene as ever.

“I see where I went astray. I assumed a small boy would amuse himself in the same way as a girl of his age. That was silly of me. It was the time when Wild West stories were all the rage. I could swear he rigged up a wigwam hereabouts, with tomahawk and cache complete! Do the youngsters who come on Sundays camp anywhere round here?”

“Yes, at the Table Rock, as it’s called.”

It was less than a hundred yards from the garden, but one had to force one’s way through a tangle of brushwood to get to it. The ground was slippery. From a crevice in the hillside a spring bubbled up, brimmed over into a tiny rivulet.

“The Table Rock’s a bit farther on.”

It was exactly what the name conveyed—a slab of stone about a yard square, lying in the bed of a stream; it looked as if it had been planned by a mason, so smooth it was. It was covered by a sheet of crystal-clear water that at the farther edge fell over, forming a glittering curtain about three feet high. On every side was lush green moss.

Eliane followed the Superintendent’s movements with fascinated eyes.

“I’ve often seen boy scouts here,” she remarked.

And here, almost certainly, forty years before, Monsieur Serge had played the trapper, or Red Indian chief. It was difficult to see through the

veil of tumbling water, but, reaching across it, Labbé found, as he'd expected, that the ground under the stone had been hollowed out.

The cavity was too small to take a full-grown man. But, by crouching, a child could wriggle inside and picture himself hiding from his enemies in a mountain cavern.

Labbé explored with his hand the damp moss-grown sides. It was a long process, but at last he withdrew his arm, hauling out some heavy object.

"Whom does this land belong to?" he asked.

"It used to be mamma's. Now it's been sold along with the chalet to Monsieur Kampf. But it's still leased to us."

"In that case, we'll open it at your house."

It was a lead casket about a foot long by six inches wide. Leeches were clinging to one side of it.

Though it was not yet six, the lamps had to be lit in the living-room. Everything seemed gray, the hue of the rain which had been falling steadily for forty-eight hours; faces and movements seemed to reflect the dreariness of the day.

Madame Meurice watched the box being opened. It had no lock, and it was almost empty.

Thirty-one thousand-franc notes lay scattered about it. Beneath them the photograph of a lady dressed in the style of the 'eighties. Leg-of-mutton sleeves, a tiny long-stemmed parasol. Standing in front of a landscape painted on a backcloth, she held a little boy by the hand.

Poor as the likeness was, and faded, it conveyed an impression—especially the woman's face—of poignant sadness. A young woman. Finely molded features. But the smile-to-order with which she had faced the camera was desperately forlorn.

The boy was wearing a sailor suit, a wide straw hat with curled-up brims.

Madame Meurice's eyes grew misted. She was about the age of that woman, and hadn't she, too, a photograph stowed away somewhere, of herself, smiling, holding her little daughter's hand? And perhaps forty years hence there would be strangers looking at it...

The Superintendent broke in on her musings.

"Unless I'm much mistaken, that's Monsieur Serge as a small boy."

There was only one thing more in the box, another photograph. This one was neither worn nor faded. After a quick glance Madame Meurice lowered her eyes, blushing.

It was a photograph of herself.

“If the whole problem isn’t entirely solved,” said Labbé, “this box clears up most of the facts. For some reason, Monsieur Serge, who once lived in this chalet, returns to his old house. He brings a hundred thousand francs and hides them in a cache which played a great part in his boyhood.

“These notes were a reserve fund that he didn’t mean to broach, for he waited till the last possible moment before doing so. Probably he expected to be getting money sent him.

“He pretended to go to Munster. In reality he came here at night and got the few thousand francs he needed.

“A theft took place that night. He fell under suspicion. When he found he couldn’t clear himself he came here again, fetched sixty thousand francs and deposited them at the *Grand Hotel*, where they’d be found next day.”

“So you don’t think he stole that money?”

“I’m convinced that he didn’t,” the Superintendent said, as he closed the box.

He took his leave abruptly, as if fearing he might be asked for explanations.

At the hotel a telegram awaited him. He retreated to a corner to decode it. Lena came to see if he wanted a drink.

“A hot grog, please.”

The name “Commodore” had caught his eye at once. Pencil in hand, he wrote the words beneath the figures:

Italian police report a double of the Commodore at Venice staying at same hotel under name Serge Morrow and a girl with him stop The two men had an interview stop Italian police inquire should surveillance continue stop Wire reply stop Sûreté Paris.

Another wet day. Nick, who was in a vile humor, spent the morning nagging at Lena and the cook.

In the early afternoon the Packard drew up outside the *Grand*. After a while, Madame Van der Laer came down and started off in it. She was back in an hour and a half, which showed she had gone no farther than Munster.

Lena kept on bursting into tears at unpropitious moments—when she was serving a customer with beer, or shelling peas. Each time she did so, Nick flew into a rage.

At three the postman appeared, drenched and spattered with slush up to the peak of his hood, his cycle caked with mud. From his bag he produced another telegram.

Commodore's corpse found Grand Canal Venice stop Awaiting further details.

The dismal day dragged on uneventfully. Gray skies, rain-blurred windows, a film of moisture even on the tables.

Nick kept on drinking and trying to inveigle his solitary guest to join him—for Hertzfeld was away on holiday.

The brewer's car passed on its way towards the chalet, the shabby hood sagging with water. An hour later it passed again, without stopping, in the opposite direction.

From time to time a window opened at the *Grand*, someone gazed out despondently at the downpour, closed it again.

At six a telegram:

Commodore's corpse has scar on nose stop Double registered under name of Morrow has left with girl stop No trace violence on body stop Italian police classifying case as suicide.

Labbé held his peace. He looked depressed. He rang up Paris to make sure no urgent case required his presence there.

“Will you be staying with us some days longer?” Madame Keller inquired with an engaging smile.

“Can't say... Possibly.”

Had he guessed the truth about the theft from Van der Laer's room? Or had he only an inkling? In any case, he kept watching the porter in a peculiar way. So much so that Fredel began to feel uncomfortable and ceased coming across to the *Relais* for drinks.

At nine a special messenger from Gérardmer brought another telegram:

Morrow believed to have proceeded Switzerland in big Italian car stop Awaiting confirmation from Swiss police.

A particularly gloomy evening. The Superintendent seemed reluctant to go to bed. He spoke to no one. Nick read the local paper, sipped sugary

liqueurs. Resting her elbow on the counter, Madame Keller stared glumly into vacancy. Lena kept sobbing as she tidied up.

By eleven only Nick and Labbé were left in the restaurant; they sat in opposite corners.

At last, at midnight, Labbé rose and, muttering a vague good-night, tramped upstairs.

It was blowing great guns. At dinner the hotel-keeper had remarked:

“We’re in for a storm. But perhaps it’ll blow itself out tonight, and then we’ll have a spell of better weather.”

The constant wind and rain had worn everyone out. A nervous exhaustion which made them sleep badly, by fits and starts.

Labbé stayed in bed late, only coming downstairs at nine.

“No telegram for me yet?”

Lena was washing the windows. The road was still wet, strewn with broken branches, draggled leaves.

“Nothing’s come. I hear the Gérardmer road is blocked. A big pine-tree’s fallen across it. They’re shifting it now.”

It hadn’t yet cleared up, the sky was still overcast. But the clouds were lighter.

“If the sun comes out before midday, we’ll be all right.”

As a matter of fact, the sun came out round about eleven, but only for a few minutes, just long enough for Madame Van der Laer to display herself at her window in salmon-pink silk pajamas.

The road was drying in patches. On the terrace of the *Grand* the porter set out again the gaudy sunshades. At 11:30 the Dutchman appeared, ordered a whisky and settled down to reading an Amsterdam daily paper which the postman had just brought.

When the event took place it was exactly ten to twelve. Labbé, who had heard a car come up, was standing at the door of the *Relais* watching Monsieur Kampf, who, flushed and furious, was wrestling with a punctured tire. Nick, in a white coat, had hobbled out into the road and, leaning on his crutch, seemed about to give advice to the perspiring brewer.

Lena was cleaning the chairs and tables on the terrace, Van der Laer was still engrossed in his newspaper.

Kampf straightened up.

“Come and lend a hand, Fredel.”

But Fredel, who was gazing down the Gérardmer road, seemed disinclined to move.

“Hurry up, confound you!”

No, he wouldn't budge. He pricked up his ears. The sound of an approaching car was growing audible. La Schlucht being at the summit of a five-mile rise, most cars roar up towards it in low gear. But there was nothing of a roar in the sound of this car. Only a gentle purr.

Holding his hands well away from his body, so as not to soil his clothes, Kampf shouted again:

“Hey, Fredel! Why the devil don't you come?”

But Fredel was already hastening down the steps to meet the car which was swinging round the corner, displaying a lemon-yellow bonnet, black wings, a resplendent silver radiator.

The Van der Laers' Packard was standing beside the petrol-pump, and as this car glided by it, it was seen to be even longer and more powerful than the Dutchman's.

Dumbfounded, the chauffeur stared at the new-comers. Van der Laer peeped over his newspaper. Nick exclaimed enthusiastically:

“Some car!”

It drew up in front of the main entrance of the *Grand*. Fredel hastened forward, but before he could reach the handle of the door, a chauffeur in livery with lemon-yellow facings matching the bodywork of the car sprang out from the back and opened it.

The faces of the two people in the front seats were in shadow. Pigskin driving-gloves on the wheel. A light gray suit. Beside the driver, a young woman who was turning her head in all directions like a whirligig.

Madame Van der Laer's window opened again. A head and shoulders hung out.

The chauffeur, standing stiffly to attention, waited beside the open door. A man stepped down, extending his hand towards the lady with him, to help her to alight.

It was one of these quasi-regal arrivals such as La Schlucht witnesses, with luck, two or three times a year. Already the proprietress was at the door, the staff flattening their noses against the panes.

The Packard with its dark bodywork cut a humble figure beside its rival, dazzling yellow, and a good yard longer.

The traveler said something to his chauffeur. The man bowed.

“Well, that beats everything!” Nick muttered.

The young woman looked a mere slip of a thing beside her companion, who now, gazing steadily ahead, was walking toward the entrance of the hotel. She was wearing an olive-green coat; a superb snakeskin vanity-bag was tucked under her arm. Her hands were gloved in darker green, to match her dress.

She kept on trying to turn her head in the direction of the *Relais*, but the man gave her no time to stop.

Dropping her duster, Lena shrieked *crescendo*:

“Gretel! Gretel!!”

For by now everyone had recognized the driver of the car as Monsieur Serge. The brewer had forgotten all about his punctured tire; his cheeks were crimson, he looked as if at any moment he might have an apoplectic fit. Nick Keller hurried away as fast as his crutch could carry him, to call his wife.

Madame Van der Laer’s window closed with a bang.

Meanwhile Monsieur Serge had entered the *Grand Hotel*.

“I’ll take the whole of the first floor.”

Outside, the porter was gazing sulkily at the big yellow car.

A brand-new car, fitted in sumptuous style. The merest novice could see it had cost a good half-million francs, and everyone had turned out to admire it.

Lena, who was weeping more copiously than ever, picked up her duster and began to mop her eyes with it. Purple with rage, Kampf yelled:

“Damn you, Fredel! Why don’t you come when you’re called?”

The door of the *Grand* opened. The proprietress was seen to go up to the Dutchman. With obvious reluctance he followed her inside.

What passed between them was divulged that evening by the telephone girl, who had overheard from her nook.

“May I know how much longer you expect to be staying, Monsieur Van der Laer?”

“Four or five days.”

“I’m so sorry, but I must ask you to move up a floor, to another suite. It’s exactly like the one you’re occupying now.”

He couldn’t make it out. He protested. But the proprietress was adamant.

“I’ve let the whole first floor for two months, paid in advance. I can assure you you’ll find your new rooms just as good. These people are in a hurry. If you’ve no objection, as soon as Madame Van der Laer is dressed the chambermaids will move your things. You won’t have any trouble at all.”

In their private sitting-room Monsieur Serge was saying to Gretel, whose cheeks were quivering under a pink shell of amateurish make-up:

“Stick it out, Gretel! Don’t forget your promise.”

“It’s because of Lena. What must she be thinking? I feel so horrid...”

She buried her head on his breast, sobbing.

A quarter of an hour later, a small procession of chambermaids filed up the stairs, carrying the valises, clothes, and paraphernalia of the Dutch couple who had been bundled out of their rooms like poor relations when a rich visitor arrives.

Meanwhile Nouchi was storming away at her husband.

“I never heard of such a thing! Why do you let that rotter treat us like dirt?”

Van der Laer bowed his head beneath the storm; he abhorred scenes above all things. At last he ventured on a timid protest:

“But, my dear, he’s taken the suite for two months. Really, it’s only natural...”

“And suppose I tell you to take it for three months, or four—why not a year while you’re about it?”

Leaning against the door of the *Relais*, Superintendent Labbé was placidly puffing a cheap but excellent French cigar.

11. ONE MAN LESS

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THEY had had to lock Lena up in her room. Furious at not being allowed to go across the road to see her sister, the girl had gone into hysterics. So it was Madame Keller who served lunch.

Nick sat near the brewer, who also was in a vile temper. He had not found anyone to mend his tire. After lunch he would have to get down to the distasteful job himself.

Only Superintendent Labbé seemed quite unruffled—and his indifference put the others' backs up.

"It's scandalous! A man like that, who came here in rags and tatters, who couldn't even pay his bill...!"

"And by rights should be in jail."

Kampf shot a threatening glance at the Superintendent and remarked loudly:

"Anyhow, I don't intend to let the matter drop. I've a good friend who is a Deputy. I'll get in touch with him tomorrow and tell him all about the case. Are Gretel's parent's still alive?"

"No, worse luck! The girls are orphans."

"Because it's a flagrant case of abduction, a criminal offense."

The car was being driven round the *Grand Hotel* into the garage. The first-floor windows were flung open, to air the rooms for the new-comers.

"I must say I'd like to know where he stole that car of his," growled Kampf. "Cars like that shouldn't be allowed on the road. They're not only a public danger but a provocation to the workers."

His own car still lay derelict outside the hotel, leaning on the flat tire. The hood was flapping; it looked as if at any moment the wind might carry it away.

Labbé ate his meal in silence, staring at the floor. When it was over he rose and walked up and down the road till the clock struck three.

Then, judging that lunch must be over at the *Grand*, he crossed the road, the casket under his arm.

"Under what name has your new guest registered?"

“Serge Morrow.” The proprietress sounded anxious. “I say, there’s not going to be any more bother, is there? Madame Van der Laer has told us that if these people have their meals in the restaurant she’ll leave at once. Luckily they lunched in another room.”

“Have they finished lunch?”

“Yes, they’re having their coffee and liqueurs. It’s all right, isn’t it, Superintendent, their staying here?”

It was the proprietor’s private sitting-room that had been requisitioned. The armchairs had been left, and seated in one of them Monsieur Serge was smoking a Havana and watching Gretel, who was eating a peach, with half-closed eyes.

“Come in.” He did not rise as the Superintendent entered, nor hold out his hand. He merely pointed, not to an armchair but to an ordinary straight-backed chair. Somehow he gave an impression of being taller. He looked quite composed; his least gesture had a languid grace.

“So you found the casket!”

Poor Gretel! She didn’t dare look at the visitor. She seemed ill at ease in her pretty dress. And an eminent coiffeur had given her hair a new wave that had changed her appearance for the worse.

She still looked like a doll. But a badly assembled doll. She didn’t know how to handle her fruit-knife, it kept slipping off the peach on to the plate—which flustered her still more.

“Go upstairs, my dear. I’ll join you later.” His tone was affectionate, but distant. “Try to sleep a bit.”

He rang for the waiter.

“Leave the liqueurs on the table and bring another glass. And the box of cigars.”

He waited till the order had been carried out and Gretel had closed the door behind her. Then his eyes settled on the Superintendent. He asked:

“Have you anything to tell me?”

“First of all, I want to give you this casket, which, I believe, is yours.”

Monsieur Serge indicated that he could put it on the table.

“Is that all?”

The room was a small one, decorated in the meretricious “modern style” that one finds in most recently built hotels. The furniture was shoddy. Bleak autumn sunlight glimmered on the panes.

“Needless to say,” Monsieur Serge continued with a faint sigh, “my identity papers are in order. I’m Serge Morrow, director of a dozen companies, and if you hope to find anything wrong in my passports, you’ll be disappointed.”

There was a hint of weariness in his voice.

“Is it this ‘Commodore’ business that’s keeping you here?”

He rose to his feet, and of a sudden he seemed quite different from the Monsieur Serge whom Labbé had known; younger, much more forceful. He walked to the door, opened it quickly, made sure no one was behind it, closed it carefully.

“You’ve no warrant of arrest, I presume? No. Anyhow it wouldn’t be of the least use. There’s no charge against me. And a hundred highly placed people would gladly vouch for the character of Monsieur Serge Morrow... But I’m glad you’ve come to see me. Yes, I mean it. You’re a good sort, Superintendent. An excellent employee, whom the State pays two thousand six hundred francs a month, and whose services are worth much more.”

The tone was patronizing, but not in the least offensive —so wide was the gulf that suddenly had yawned between the two men in the room.

“I told you I was glad to see you because, for the second time in my life perhaps, I’m in a mood for talking about myself. There’s no one to overhear us. And obviously I’d deny everything if you started repeating what I tell you. You’d only lose your job. Yes, I assure you! I’ve had two of your best colleagues broken for less.

“Do I understand you really mean to give me back that casket? Don’t bother, all I want is a photograph—of a young mother and a little boy. As for the rest...”

He spoke indifferently, but none the less he sighed.

“Chartreuse, Armagnac, brandy?”

He poured out two glasses of Armagnac.

“Did you get a wire to say the Commodore was dead, I wonder? No, don’t ask my real name. You’ve found out that I spent my boyhood at the chalet. That’s all you’ll ever learn. You can make all the inquiries you like,

but they won't get you any forrader. No one needs to know who the Commodore is. And anyhow, what would you gain by it?

"Really you know almost as much as I do about him, don't you?

"Millions got by swindling people who, as a matter of fact, had more money than they knew what to do with. And were out to make even more.

"But that's not what I wanted to speak to you about... Here's luck! No, I want to talk about an episode of my life in which you've played a part.

"You've never been rich. A pity. The police should employ people who've been in every station in life; they'd understand things better.

"Look up your records again. The Commodore made three millions at Prague, five at Berlin, two at Budapest... and so it went on, over a period of twenty years.

"People envied him. 'The happiest of mortals!'

"Then one fine day the Commodore found he'd had enough of it. He took a trip to a little out-of-the-way place which had sentimental associations for him.

"What did you say? Nothing? I thought... Do have a cigar. These Havanas are in excellent condition... And, do you know, they set me thinking of a fag-end I picked up in the street when I was twenty. Never since then have I enjoyed a smoke so much!

"No. Don't interrupt. Try to realize... Try to imagine an adventurer who's knocked about the world, learnt by experience there's nothing money can't buy—and yet has kept somehow, deep down in himself, a hankering for the simple life, the life of an ordinary man.

"It was as an ordinary man he came here. He'd discovered a fellow who looked extremely like him. That, by the way, is an idea worth looking into. Everybody has one or two 'doubles' in the world. It's only a matter of hunting round. Picture a clever criminal who has at his disposal three or four men just like himself. Not only would he outwit the police every time, but there's nothing he couldn't do.

"I needed only one. I coached him. He was down-and-out when I discovered him, and he seemed reliable. I said to him:

" 'Till further notice you shall be the Commodore. This is how it's done... All I ask of you is to remit four thousand francs a month to such and such an address.'

“I left the future undecided, so that, if he let me down, I could go back to the old life.

“I came here with a hundred thousand francs, to provide for emergencies, and hid the money at the place where, as a boy, I’d played at being a Red Indian.

“Two months went by. No car. No servants. The simple life of the *Relais d’Alsace*. And at the chalet I found something even better than memories of my youth. A nice woman, a mother like the mother I’d loved... And a little girl.

“It was sheer joy, roaming for hours about the mountains, eating, drinking... Unsophisticated pleasure, the sort that money can’t buy.

“And a subtler, profounder joy up there at the chalet—a good woman’s company. Make no mistake. Not a word passed between us. But I persuaded myself... I toyed with hopes...

“The fellow who was carrying on as the Commodore forgot to send the money we’d agreed on. No, he didn’t forget. I’d asked him to be my understudy. He took the part in earnest. He came to think he *was* the Commodore and could snap his fingers at the real one.

“So I had to visit my cache and take a few thousand francs. That night the theft took place. And Nouchi crossed my path—Nouchi who’d been my mistress at Budapest and helped me to do her husband out of several millions. After which I’d dropped her.

“She had her revenge. I was accused of a sordid crime, not in my line at all! I’d ceased to be the Commodore. I was a poor devil, Monsieur Serge, who’d stolen sixty thousand francs. I was spied on, cold-shouldered by everybody. A pariah.

“And I’d been dreaming of a very different life, up at the chalet. Crazy, wasn’t it? At the chalet it was a near thing I wasn’t shown the door!”

A change came over his expression. His voice grew harsh.

“And I deserved it. You can’t understand, of course. But lapses of that sort are—inexcusable. When a man’s chosen his path in life, he sticks to it, and doesn’t start looking longingly at sentimental side-tracks. The Commodore turned into a law-abiding citizen! It couldn’t work, his wings would be clipped right away. Which was what that fool at Venice thought

had happened} and he tried to keep the whole spoils for himself. And up here, fellows like Nick had the nerve to cross my path...

"The Commodore playing the guardian angel, rescuing the widow and her daughter from the clutches of Monsieur Kampf! Absurd!

"So that's that. The Commodore's his bad old self again! You have him in front of you, Superintendent, and I defy you to bring any charge whatsoever against him... Well, what do you propose to do about it?"

His tone was curt.

"I came back to this place to tell you that, and to let these people who treated Monsieur Serge like dirt have a look at the Commodore."

"Perhaps," suggested Labbé quietly, "to get back two photographs as well."

"One."

"In that case, shall I destroy the other?" He made as if to tear up Madame Meurice's portrait.

"Please yourself."

"No, I'm not so heartless as all that... Just one thing. Do you realize that you're treating Gretel rather badly?"

It was the Commodore, the skeptical adventurer, who answered him.

"You know whose mistress she was, don't you? The porter's. And do you know who, when she was only fourteen, thought fit to seduce her? Nick. Personally, let me tell you, I haven't touched her. And I don't suppose I ever shall. I don't even want to. A poor little child..."

"Whom you've merely used as a tool for taking your revenge."

"A poor little child to whom I'll give two hundred thousand francs tomorrow or next week, to do what she likes with." Again there was an undertone of sadness in his voice.

"The two hundred thousand," Labbé put in gently, "that you'd thought of giving another woman."

Suddenly the Commodore asked impulsively:

"You've been to the chalet. What did they say?"

"Nothing much... Did you know that Kampf is here, with a flat tire?"

Monsieur Serge chuckled, poured himself out another Armagnac.

"He'll marry her... No doubt it's better so."

There was a long silence.

“Yes, it was too good to be true. Like a view on a picture-postcard.”

“By the way... One of the two Commodores is dead. His body was found in a canal, at Venice.”

“So you’ve heard already?”

“And the other one’s taken his place. Which means...”

“Which means, Monsieur Labbé, that when a man’s fifty there’s no breaking with the past. I can be quite frank, nobody’s listening, and if you repeat anything I say, I’ll simply deny having said it. One day, in a weak moment, a man felt a desire to settle down in a quiet spot. And it’s precisely in that quiet spot he ran up against his greatest difficulties. Because he wasn’t smartly dressed any more, hadn’t a big car, didn’t talk like someone who’s used to being obeyed.

“Then he came back with his car, lots of money in his pocket... Look here! What’ll you bet Madame Van der Laer won’t run away with me tomorrow if I ask her?” There was little arrogance, rather a note of melancholy, in his voice.

Again it changed abruptly, grew harsh, metallic.

“Net result—a corpse in the canal. A case of suicide according to the police... When you leave this room, Monsieur Labbé, we’ll be enemies again. So much the better. All I ask is: Make the fight as bitter as you can. Strenuous enough to give me an interest in life.”

Without another word he left the room. In the first-floor suite of evil memory, Gretel lay sleeping on a bed. Her skirt had rucked up, displaying a rather sturdy leg, sheathed for the first time in real silk.

Through the window, beyond a green expanse of forest, the roof of the chalet could be seen.

Monsieur Serge pressed the button of the electric bell.

“Tell the proprietress to come.”

Surprised but deferential, she looked at him inquiringly.

“We’re leaving in an hour.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. You can keep the money I’ve given in advance for the two months. Send the porter here.”

The blinds were down, the room in semi-darkness. Gretel was still sleeping on the bed.

Fredel appeared on the threshold, blushing.

Monsieur Serge went up to him and, like a man yielding to a sudden, exasperated impulse, smacked him in the face.

“That’s all,” he said promptly. “Here’s a hundred francs for you. Clear out!”

He shut the door in the man’s face. And Fredel never realized what was behind that blow—not a mere outburst of temper, but the avowal of a whole life’s failure.

When, towards four, Kampf saw the car starting off again, he guffawed.

“Good riddance!”

From her second-floor window Madame Van der Laer cast an envious glance at Gretel.

Nick sniffed ironically.

“Just swank! He wanted to show off his car. And Gretel—who’s lost her looks, the silly fool.”

A faint purring in the distance. Already the car was vanishing round the bend.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A 3S Release— v1, html]

[June 04, 2006]